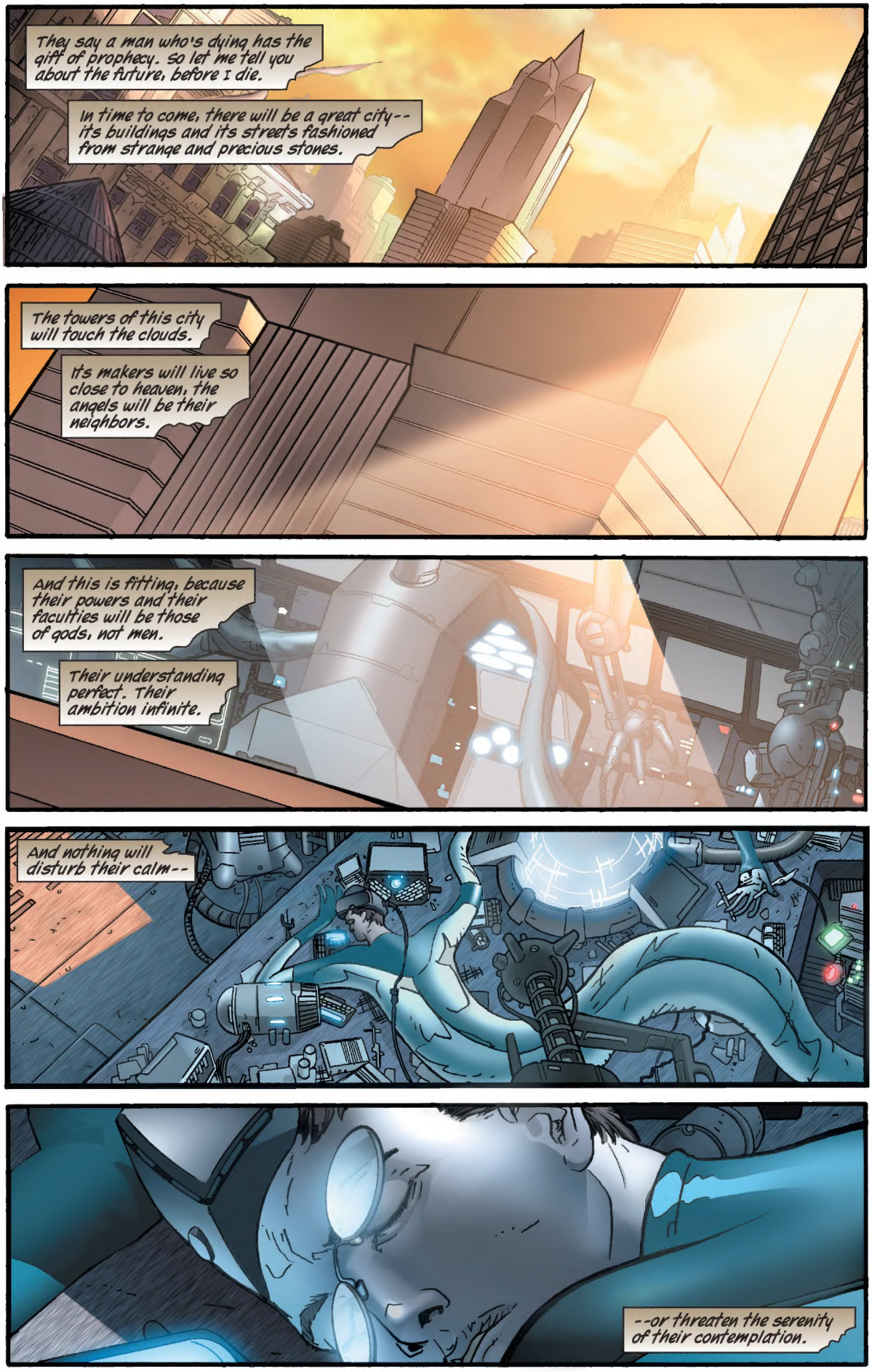
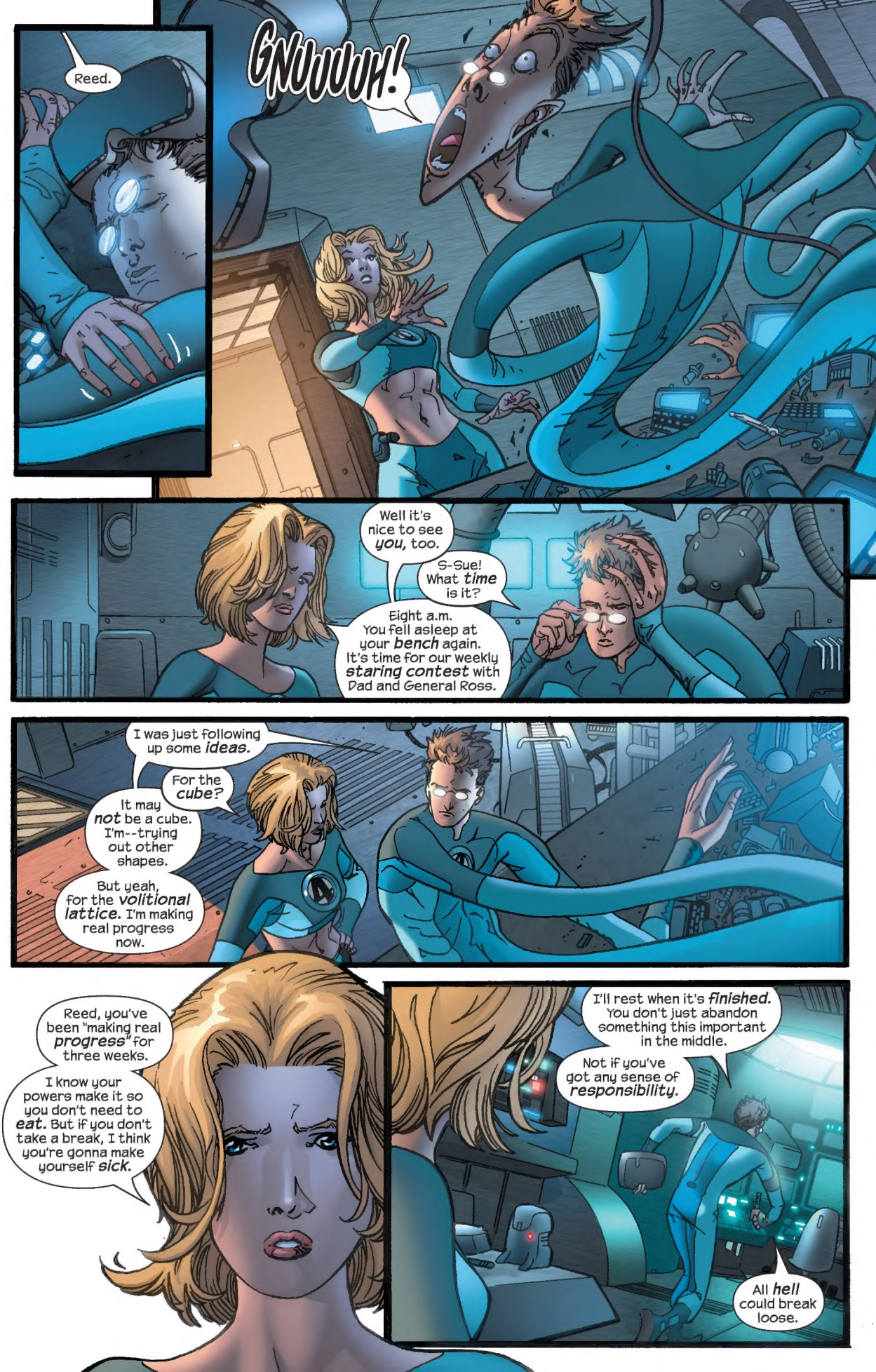
#39
SALVADOR
PACOROCA

DEVILS


They say a man who's dying has the gift of prophecy. So let me tell you about the future, before I die.
In time to come, there will be a great city-- its buildings and its streets fashioned from strange and precious stones.
The towers of this city will touch the clouds.
Its makers will live so close to heaven, the angels will be their neighbors.
And this is fitting, because their powers and their faculties will be those of gods, not men.
Their understanding perfect. Their ambition infinite.
And nothing will disturb their calm--
--or threaten the serenity of their contemplation.


Reed.
GNUUUUH!
Well it's nice to see *you*, too.
S-Sue! What *time* is it?
Eight a.m. You fell asleep at your *bench* again. It's time for our weekly *staring contest* with Dad and General Ross.
I was just following up some *ideas*.
For the *cube*?
It may *not* be a cube. I'm--trying out other shapes.
But yeah, for the *volitional lattice*. I'm making real progress now.
Reed, you've been "making real *progress*" for three weeks.
I know your powers make it so you don't need to *eat*. But if you don't take a break, I think you're gonna make yourself *sick*.
I'll rest when it's *finished*. You don't just abandon something this important in the middle.
Not if you've got any sense of *responsibility*.
All *hell* could break loose.

Milan.
1483
When we caged the devil.

Hearing Death's mocking snicker at our backs, some of us wavered.
Vecchiato, he's fighting back!
You said--we'd be able to take him--by surprise!
But to stop now would allow our enemy to become immortal--omnipotent.
A minute more, Cesare.
Let's give him something else to think about.
It was folly to pretend we had a choice.
Diventerete, anderete nel' corpo, nel' sangue nell' anima--
BOOOOOM

Mio maestro! You're hurt!
Nurghhh! They broke my concentration as I tried to manifest the stone.
The stone? I--I thought we were trying to distill a liquid?

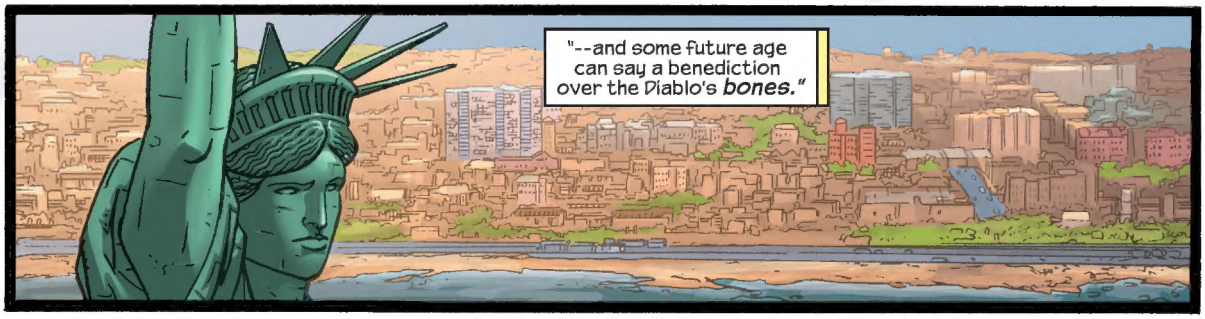
It's the same thing, you cretin. Xerion. The rock on which Heaven is built.
In solid form it transmutes the elements. As a liquid it confers immortality.
Oh, Vecchiato will pay with his blood and bones for this betrayal!

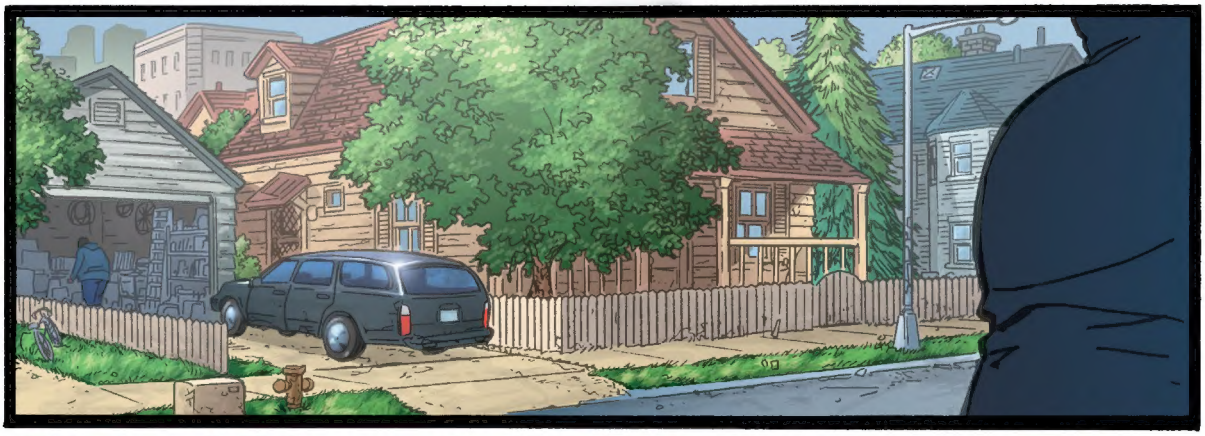
Oh Jesu! The window, maestro, the window!
Look! The sun has gone out! God is angry with us!

The sun has not gone out. My rivals have walled us in, that's all.
They feared my success, and so they have entombed me under stone and ward and sigil. Very clever of them.

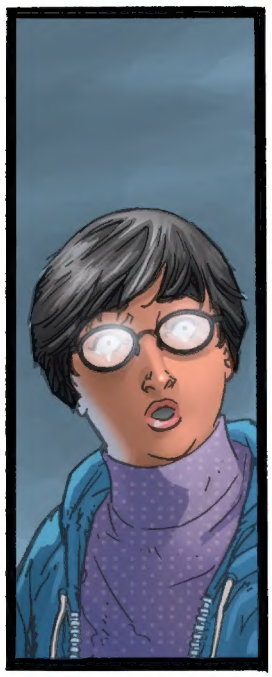
But fortune still smiles on me, Peppone.
Look at the gift she's left upon my pillow.

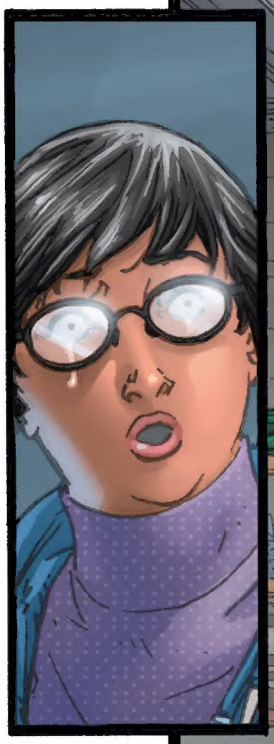
It was hard to succumb to gravity again.
Vecchiato, do you think that this will work?
Of course it will work, Paulus. Our own tower contains Diablo's at every point.
But the job was done, and it ill befits a serious scientist to glide above the rooftops like a pigeon.
But look at the cost. Cesare died to build this thing.
If the devil breaks free again, how will we stop him?
He'll not break free. Our alchemy combined is stronger than his. And we've set the four elements to guard him.
No mortal force can breach these walls. You know that.
Still, Diablo was refining the stone of ages, from whose tincture is made the elixir of eternal life.
He might try again. And succeed.
Without equipment? Without light or fuel? Calm your fears, dottore.
We ourselves will come to corruption and then to dust before this tower crumbles--


"--and some future age can say a benediction over the Diablo's *bones.*"



Hi, Mom.





Oh, Benjy Benjy Benjy!
What *took* you so long? What took you so damn long?
You should be *ashamed!*

I told you in the letters, Mom. I was a military secret.
And after I had that fight with Carl--I didn't even know for sure if I'd be welcome.

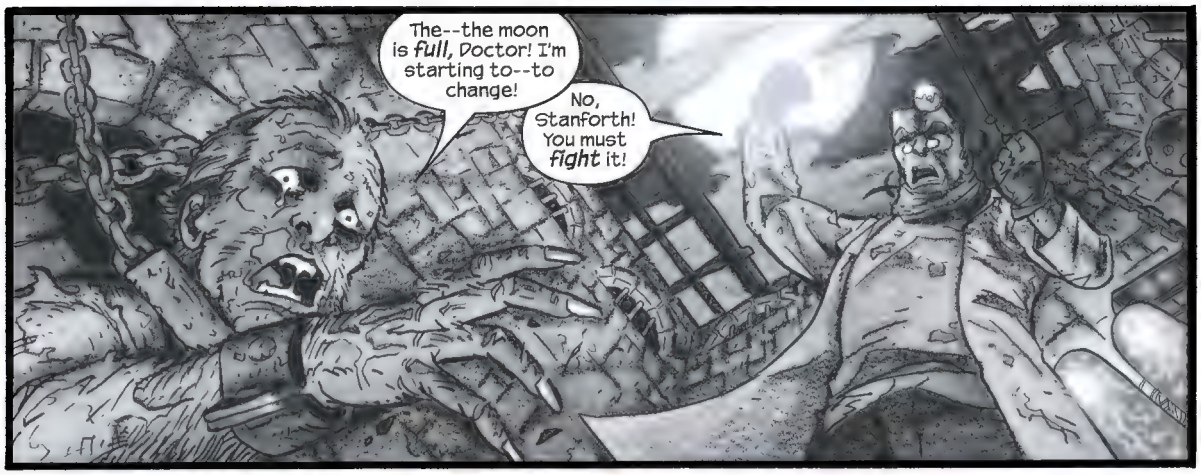
I'm not with Carl any more.
No?
No. So. You looked worse on the TV. More--frightening.
But you're still my Benjy. I can see that now.
When was I on the TV?

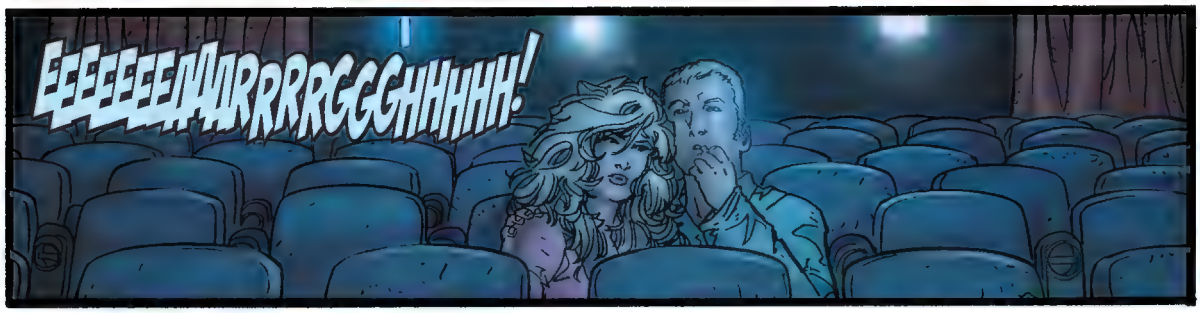
You were fighting some man named Namor. You and your friends. They had to close off all of midtown.
Look at this. I'm crying. I didn't want to cry.
But I've been so worried about you.

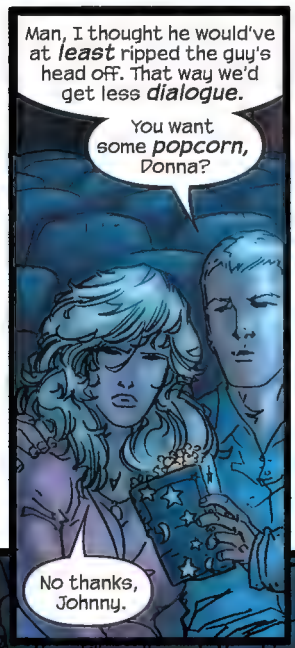
You feel that? Nothing's gonna get through that. It's like I'm living inside my own personal tank.
Oh my lord! Yes.

And you're--happy, Benjy? This is what you want?

It's fading now. But you saw it, Peppone.
Yes, Maestro, I saw it. But I don't know what place that was.
Another country. Very far from here.
Vecchiato's hacked-together nostrums can shut me from the world for as long as this tower stands.
But nothing prevents me from reaching forward into the time after it falls.
They call it the future.
Four elements imprison me. Four elements must free me. And I will find them.
But maestro, even then you can't complete the incubation of the elixir vitae.
The energies almost killed you--
This will take years. But we can live on mushrooms. Mushrooms grow in the dark, just as we must now.
We will interrogate the future, Peppone.
And the future will tell us all we need to know.


The--the moon is *full*, Doctor! I'm starting to--to change!
No, Stanforth! You must *fight* it!

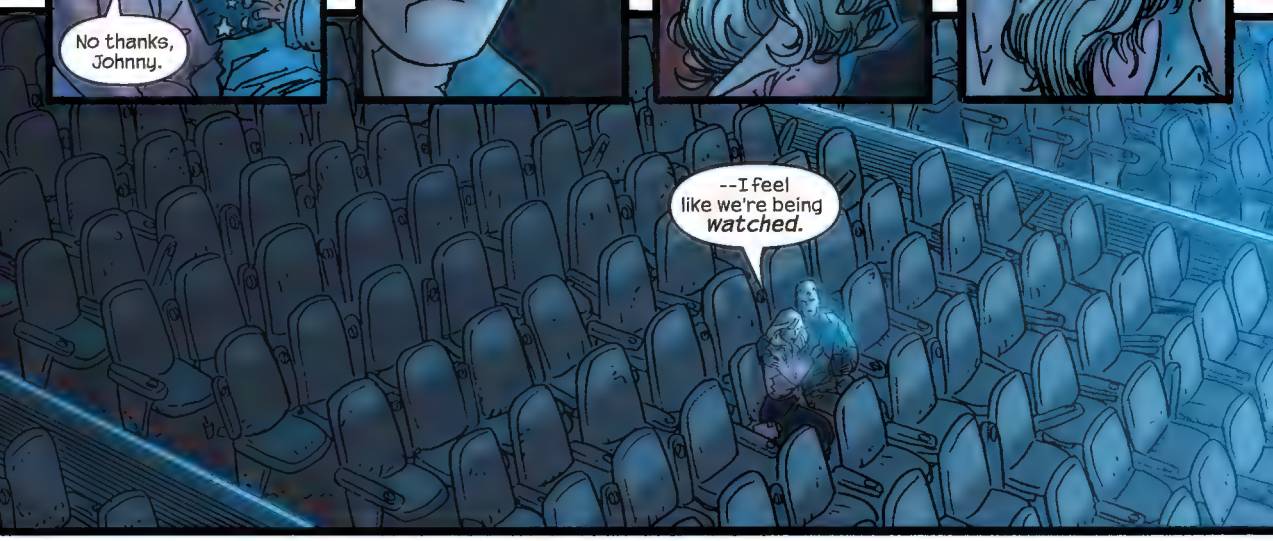

EEEEEEEIIAIIRRRRGGGHHHHH!

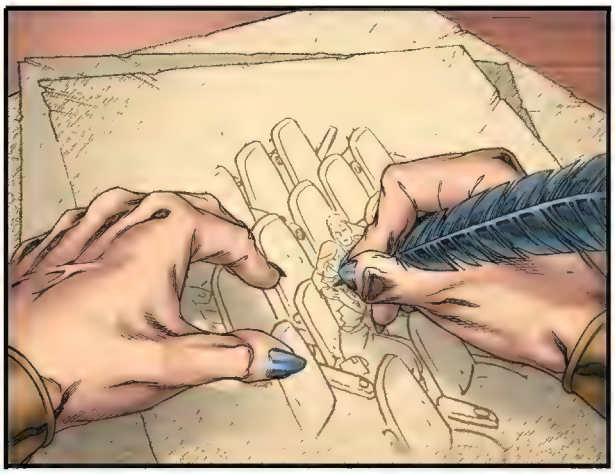

Man, I thought he would've at *least* ripped the guy's head off. That way we'd get less *dialogue*.
You want some *popcorn*, Donna?
No thanks, Johnny.

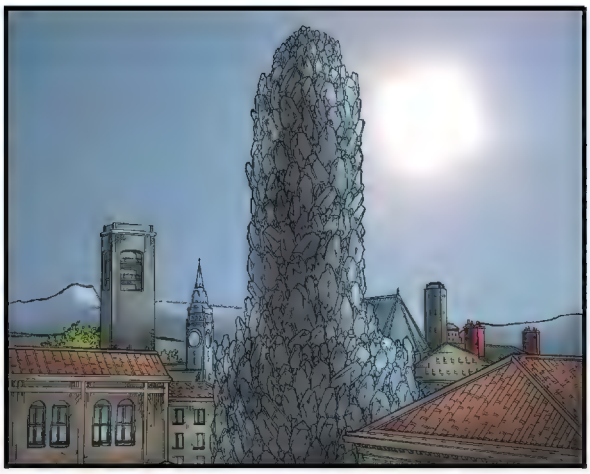
What's up? You still mad at me? Honest, if I could've called you from where I was, I would've.
But it was--y'know--super hero work. Other *dimensions* and stuff. My cell couldn't pick up a *network*.

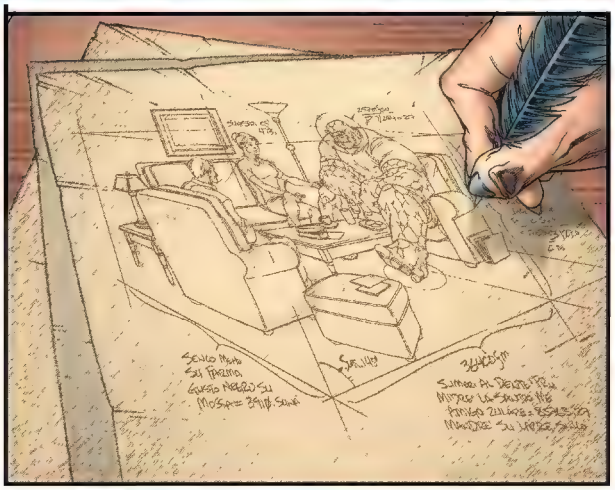
It's not that, Johnny. That's *fine*. When your back is turned I fool around with *other* guys.
You do???

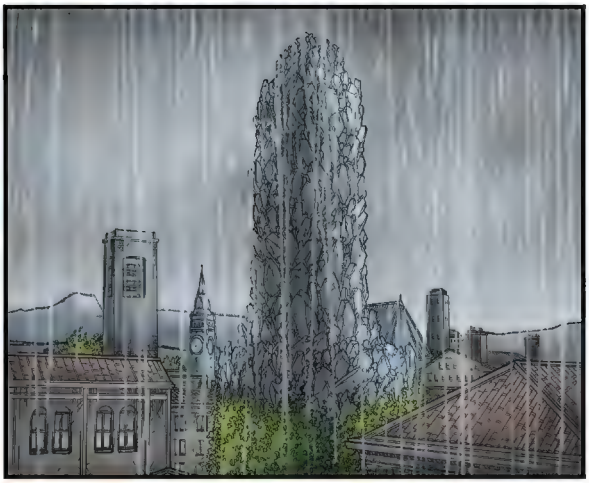
Nah, not yet. Just giving you fair *warning*. But--
--this is gonna sound crazy--

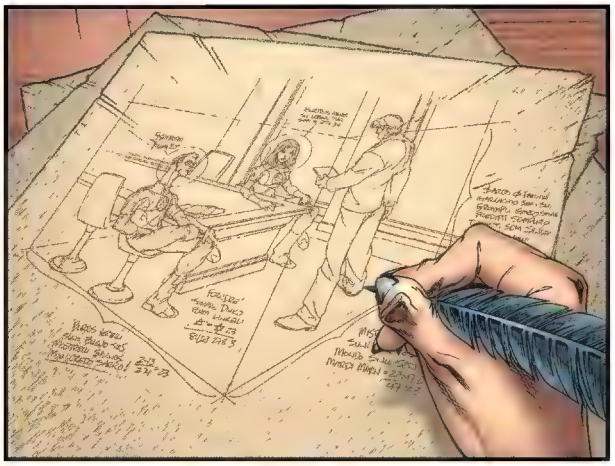

--I feel like we're being *watched*.

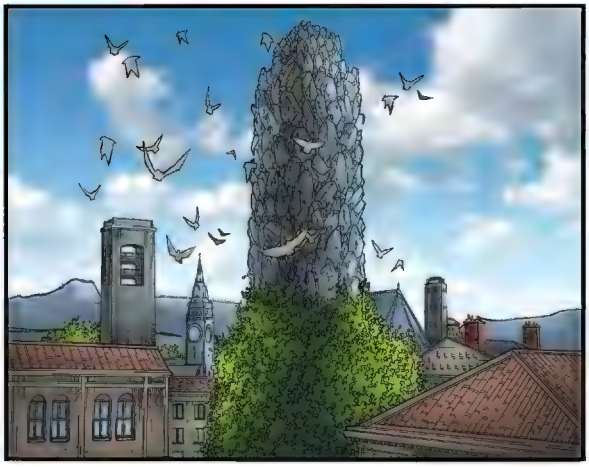


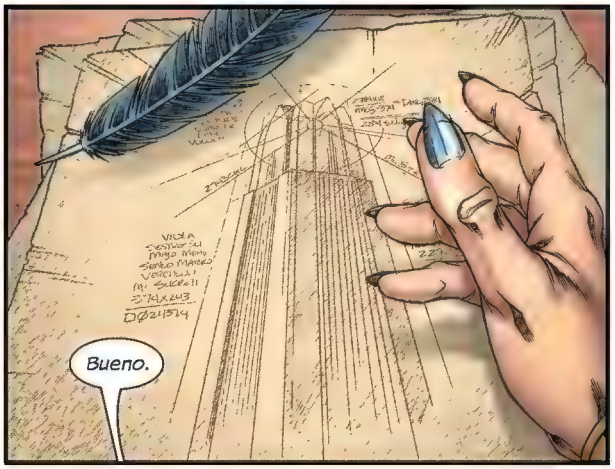






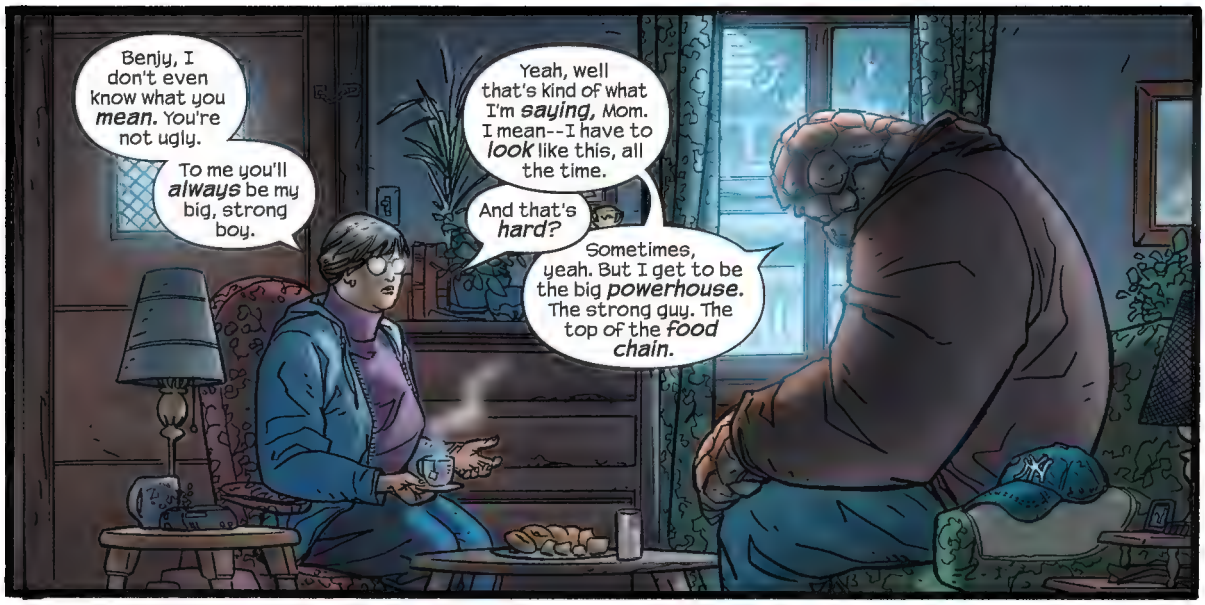





Bueno.

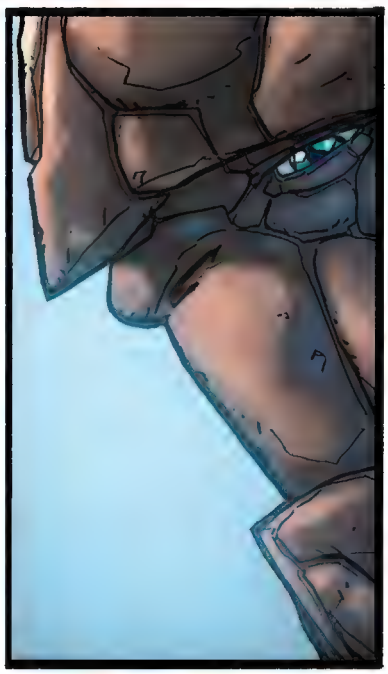
Buenissimo.

Sixteen years passed as quickly as a day. That is God's magic, more powerful than anything I could ever wield.
I stayed on in Milan, in the service of the Duke Sforza.
As for the past-- I thought it dead and buried.
But it never stays that way.
Dottore! Dottore Vecchiato! The--the tower!
The tower with no door!
What of it, boy? Can't you see I'm working?
There is a noise from within, Dottore! Like the turning of a great engine.
Is it an omen?
Merciful God, I pray you.
Let it not be so.
No, it's no omen. Omens tell of the future. This is a present evil.
Send my compliments to signores Paulus and Stranza. Tell them--
--tell them the devil has awoken.


Benjy, I don't even know what you mean. You're not ugly.
To me you'll always be my big, strong boy.
Yeah, well that's kind of what I'm saying, Mom. I mean--I have to look like this, all the time.
And that's hard?
Sometimes, yeah. But I get to be the big powerhouse. The strong guy. The top of the food chain.

But in this other universe I kept getting my butt handed to me.
Brute. Gallowglass. Ronan. They were all strong. Strong wasn't anything much there.

And then I get to thinking--y'know--there's Thor. There's the Hulk. There's that metal guy from the X-Men.
I'm really not anywhere near the top. I'm really not--anything--

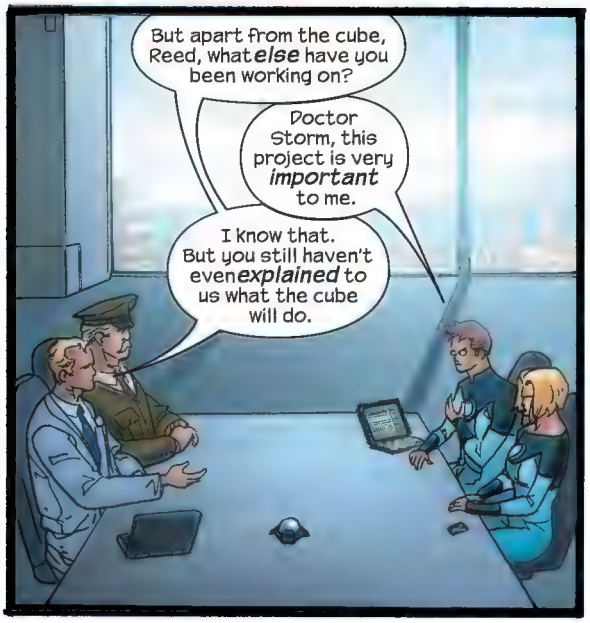


Anything special?
Bingo.
Oh Benjy, you're such an idiot. You're just like your dad.

He used to think the same thing. When he was out of *work,* he'd say that.
"There's a couple of *million* of us out there. I'm nothing special."
And then he'd get up and he'd ride the *bus* all the way out to Paterson or Morristown to see if they had any work there.
And he'd stand in a *line* for five or six hours. Just waiting. And if he didn't get taken on he'd ride the bus all the way *back* again.
It's your *spirit* that makes you special, Benjy. That's part of your strength, too. I don't think
THUD
MOMMMMMMM!

No one's watching, babe. The movie's so boring, even the *projectionist* passed out.
So why don't we just enjoy the--

D-Donna???


But apart from the cube, Reed, what *else* have you been working on?
Doctor Storm, this project is very *important* to me.
I know that. But you still haven't even *explained* to us what the cube will do.

I think for the time being it

Enid, your mother called you down to *dinner* ten minutes ago!
--and Karen Stead isn't even going *out* with Adrian Brown because he wants her

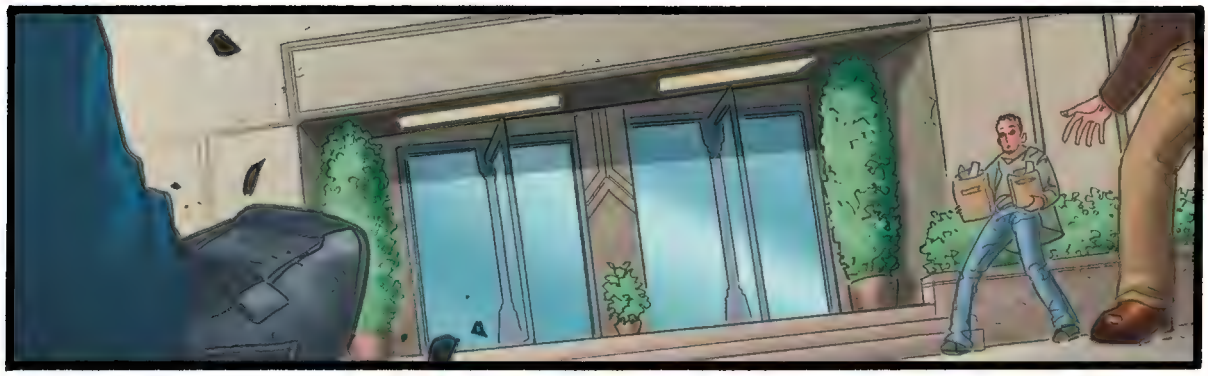
CLUNK
CLUNK
CLUNK

There now. After so many lean years--a harvest for all the ages!
Am I not a maker of miracles, Peppone?
You are incomparable, maestro!
Indeed I am.

And now--
--into the furnace with you.

M-maestro?
The nature of fire is to rise. I want you to ascend the gulf of time into this far future, and carry my message.
So it follows that you have to be on fire. That's obvious, isn't it?

Eternity demands sacrifices of all of us, Peppone.
This will be yours.

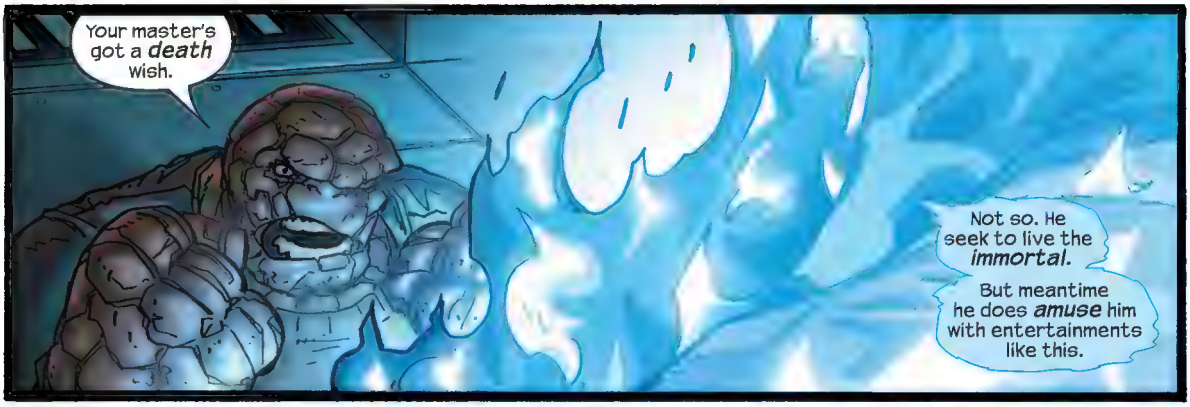


Sir, the building's on full alert. Can I please see your--
Leave it, private. The retinal and voice scans will I.D. him.
And he really doesn't look in the mood.

Please speak into the grille for voice print--
SKRANNNG
Ben Grimm.
Coming through.

Reed, you gotta help me. My mom just--
...

Elementals, my master says me to speak at you in your own tonguing.
To telling you why he has steal from you those you love completely most.
Confirm the understanding, and I will to go on.
You stole my shtick as well as my girlfriend. Better be a short speech.
Actually, maybe better be a mime.
My master are Menendez Flores, known by Diablo. The greatest alchemist of every the time lived.
He challenge you to a contest of skill. Intellect. Power. To the death.
You understand?


Your master's got a *death* wish.
Not so. He seek to live the *immortal.*
But meantime he does *amuse* him with entertainments like this.

My master will to open a *gate.* That one gate will bring you to--where he *are.* The year 1499. Milan.
If you go not--through the gate, the loved beings--will *die.* The choice is to you.
Oh, we're *coming,* pal. You bet on it.

He--hears--
He *hears* your--

Ay, dio mio! I not did think it would hurt this--

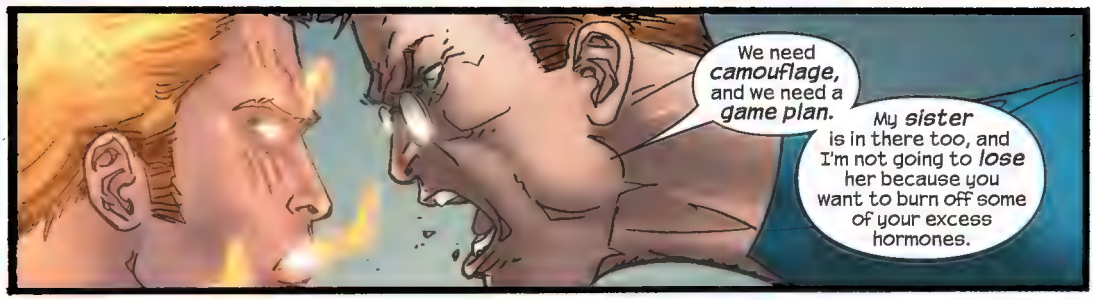
VAAAAAM

It's gonna be another one of those days, isn't it?
Reed, he took my mom.
And Doctor Storm. And Johnny's girlfriend. The only one who doesn't appear to have been targeted is me.
What? Okay, patch him through.
Richards, I've got your father on the phone.
He sounds distraught.
Hello, Dad?
What? I can't hear what you're--
The line must be bad. You sound like--
Dad, are you crying?
No, okay. Just--
Then put Mom on. Let me talk to Mom.
This is the stupidest thing I ever heard. I wanna take this Diablo's head in my hands and--
We're gonna have to find him first.
I think that part of the problem just solved itself.
Look.

Reed, what's happened?
My--my sister Enid. She's been taken, too.
What are we waiting for? The gate's right down there on the street.
I'm with you, Rocky. Let's do this.
Slow down, guys. Obviously we go through the gate.
But--a duel? Across time? It doesn't make any sense.
We're either dealing with a psychopath or someone with a hidden agenda.
My mom, Reed. He took my mom.
I know, Ben. I heard you.
Cornell, scramble B and C squads.
If you go through that thing, Richards, you're taking backup. No arguments.
Yeah. Okay.
I guess we don't have much of a choice, do we?
Let's go wage war on the Fifteenth Century.
At least we know we'll have them outgunned.

#40
PACO ROCA

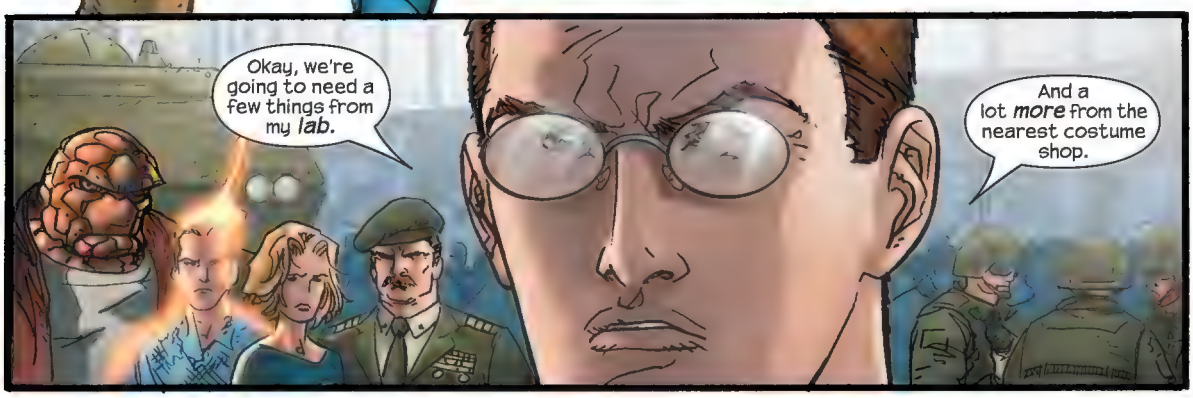
Pull focus. Yeah! There.
Right there.
We got it.
Milan. We check it as Milan. That's the Sforza castle just left of center.
Let me take a look.
The middle tower was completed in 1457. And the Torre di Savoia hasn't been built yet, so we're definitely still in the fifteenth century.
We've got a rough time frame. That's something.
Why? Why is it something, Reed? We're going in there to get Dad and the others back, not to see the sights.
What does it matter what day of the week it is?
We're going to be interfering with the past, Johnny. We should aim to make as few ripples as we can.
It's good to move fast in a hostage scenario, Richards. Locate, retrieve, fall back. That's what works.
I'm down with makin' a few ripples.
Outstanding. Let's go.



Hey, this guy is from the Middle Ages. I think we can deal.

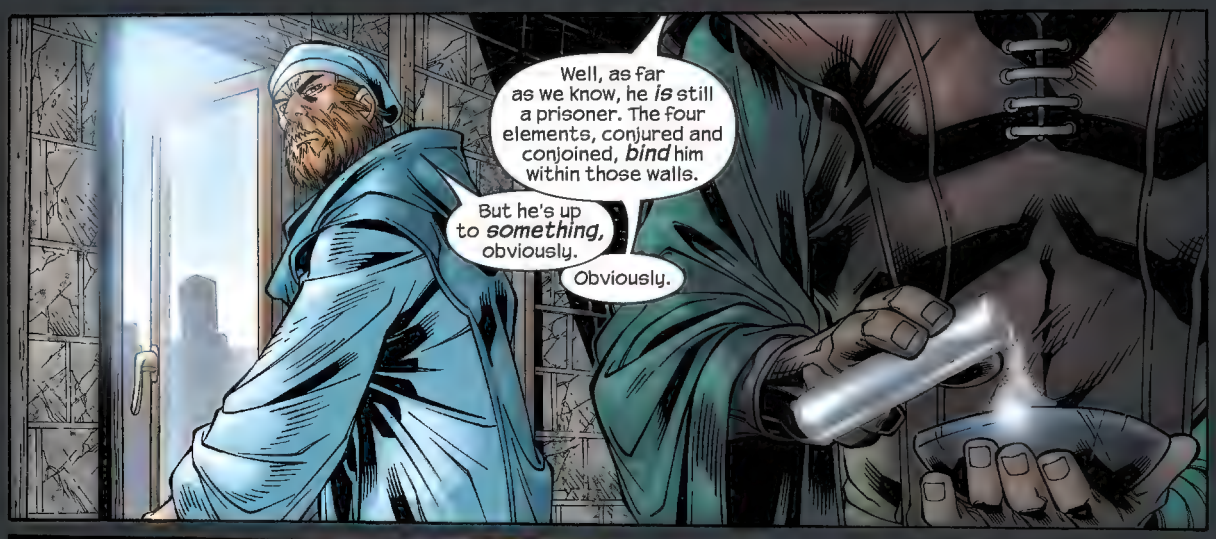
Right, he's from the Middle Ages and he's perfected time travel. Did you stop to think about that?

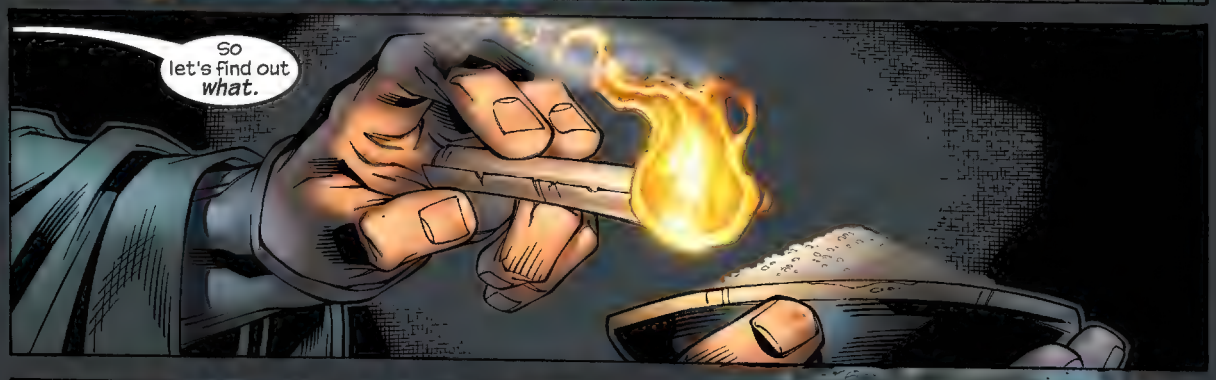
Enough, guys. Johnny, at least let Reed explain what he wants to do.



Milan. The Past.
Wake up, child.
I have need of you.
Mmnuh?
Oh, pits! I had this really stinky nightmare. I was--
You are in the workshop of Menendez Flores. El Diablo.
Like these others, you were brought here primarily to serve as bait.
Unlike them, however--
--I require you also as an ingredient.

I had invited their eminences Count Paulus and Signior Stranza to attend me at my apartments and discuss the new crisis.
Tchah! It never fails. It never, ever, fails.
Which in itself is a sign of how desperate I was.
Vecchiato! Do you see it? Do you see the devil's tower?
I assume that's a rhetorical question, Paulus. But technically, no.
I see our tower. The one we built around and over his, in order to contain him.
Stand back, please. Signior Stranza finds himself in Rome, a guest in the papal palace.
He'll probably thank us for this.
Oh. It's you, Vecchiato. So your marvelous scheme has fallen apart.
"I promise you, el Diablo will be our prisoner as long as this tower stands..."


Well, as far as we know, he *is* still a prisoner. The four elements, conjured and conjoined, *bind* him within those walls.
But he's up to *something,* obviously.
Obviously.


So let's find out *what.*

Pulver veritatis! You're burning a king's *ransom.*
No, only a *princess'.* Long story.
Pay *attention,* dottores.

See anyone you *recognize?*

Elsewhere:
Okay, it's *clear* on this side.
Strict *formation,* people. Move on my mark!
IL UOMO MONSTRO

God, let this be over soon.
Hey, at least you're on the outside lookin' in.
If anyone tries to feed me a banana, they're gonna be real sorry.
Lieutenant, the hay wagon stays here. It's a portable generator. If the time-field starts to collapse, I might be able to keep it open for a few minutes longer.
What about the other wagon?
Yeah, you can open that now.
Even in disguise, our freedom of movement is going to be limited.
We're going to need some extra eyes and ears.
So I brought some along.

What are they?
Demons, most likely. Their speech sounded a little like English.
And the English are great ones for conversing with devils.

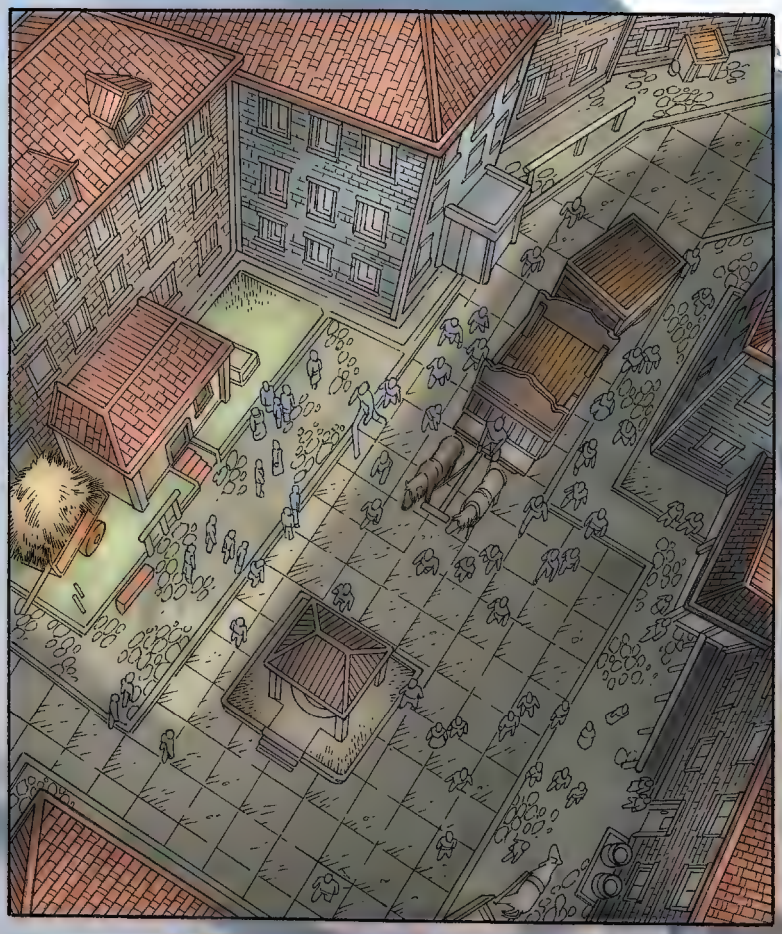
Four of them. For the four elements. I fear Diablo has found a way around our wards and sigils.
Vecchiato, will the duke call out the guard at your behest?
For this he would. But before we attack these strangers, we'd best find out what they're here for.
Prudence dictates--

Prudence is a Venetian whore, Vecchiato. A comely enough lass--
--but you mustn't let her dictate to you.

This guy Diablo's a *magician,* right?
Alchemist.
Whatever. So you're gonna have to let *us* loose on this.
He's not just gonna leave Dad and the others out where we can *see* them.
The birds are equipped with *Geiger counters.* Background radiation is ten times *higher* in our century, so the hostages should show as hot spots.
But you're *right,* Johnny. We need to keep our *eyes* open for anything anomalous.
Anomalous?
Things that look like they don't *belong.*
Thanks. Hey, Reed.
Eyes *right.* Thirty-degree elevation.
That anomalous enough for you?

Keep away from me, you creepazoid!
Or I'll whomp you with this--whatever-it-is.
It's a retort.
Thanks. I'll whomp you with this retort.
Child, in truth, I do not think so.
For this splinter which destroyed my face left me with ample compensation.
By will alone, I can turn glass and copper into water vapor.
Gaaah!
And the fragile stuff of air--
--into solid iron.
I have consummated the alchemical marriage. I wield the power of the lapis sophi--the king of elements.

But this power, great though it is, is only a conduit to something still greater.
Let me go!
I must be reborn. Immortal. Perfect. Omnipotent.
And you, grotesque little girl, will be the means to that end.
Ow! Forget it, Gargamel! I'm not interested.
I did not offer you a choice.
You see-- the stone is the fruit of the first titration. The second titration yields the elixir vitae. The sweet juice of eternal life.
But in the process, terrible energies are released. Energies sufficient to render the whole world into ash and tallow.
Hey, keep talking, toilet-breath. Spin it out.
About five seconds from now, my big brother is gonna come through that door and he's gonna smack your face off your stupid head!!!
Oh, it may take longer than that. But don't worry.
We'll wait until he comes.



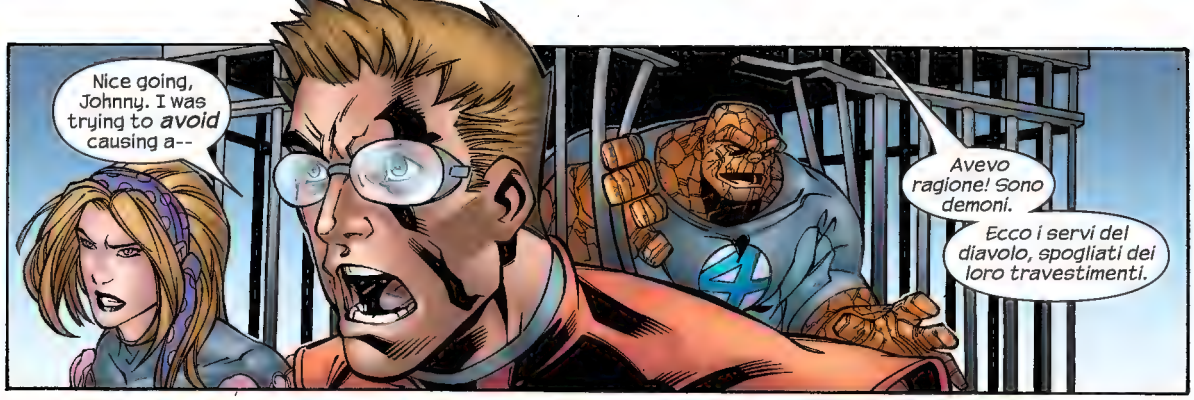
You only had to **ask.**

Flame on!!!

Dio mio! E' un ***monstro!***

Il diavolo ha spezzato le catene!

Correte!

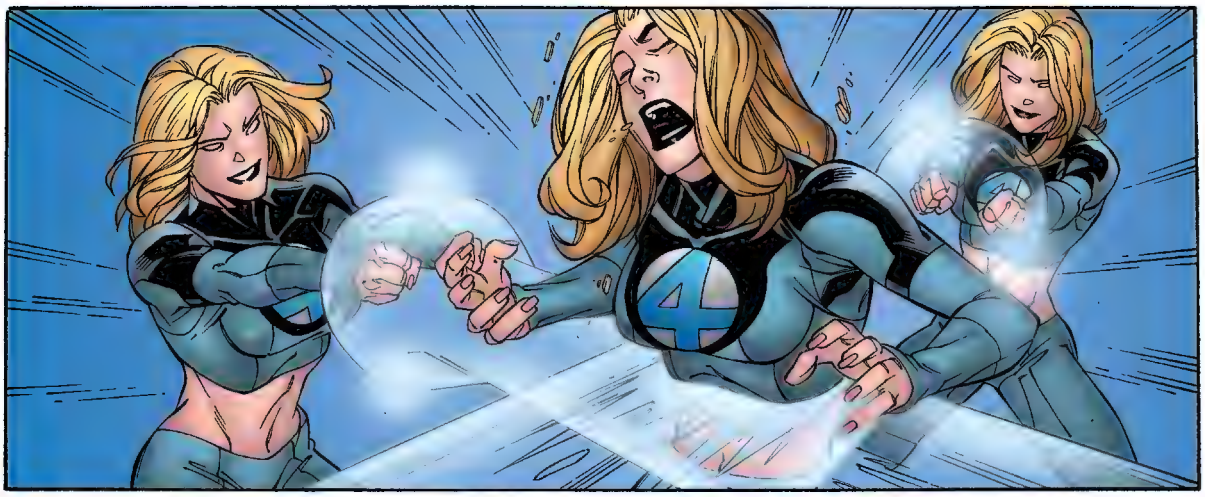

Nice going, Johnny. I was trying to avoid causing a--
Avevo ragione! Sono demoni.
Ecco i servi del diavolo, spogliati dei loro travestimenti.

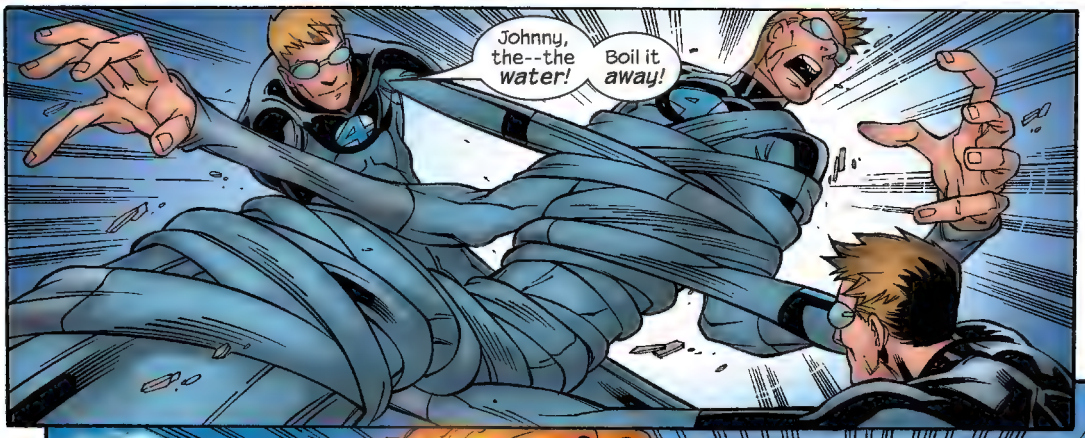
Soldati, conoscete il vostro dovere.
Prendeteli!!!
Didn't catch much of that. But I'm guessing it wasn't "welcome to sunny Italy."

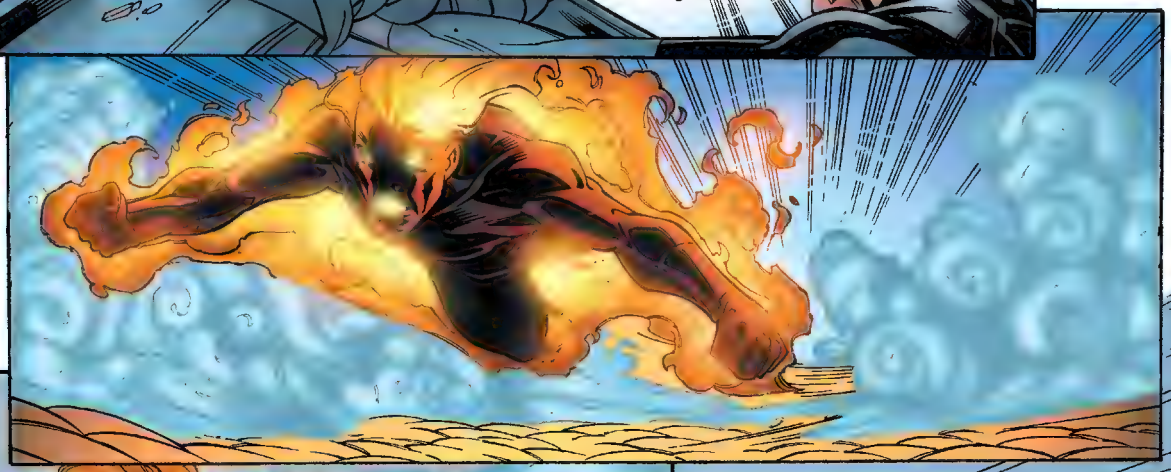
They're trying to keep us from the tower.
I guess they're working for Diablo.

Squad, return *fire!*
Lumpkin, remember what we--
Rubber bullets and CS gas, Richards. What, you think I've got *Alzheimer's?*
Let me do my *job!*
It's rude to point, pal.
Born in a *barn,* much?

Stranza is right! They're *demons*-- the soldiery of Hell!
It begins to *look* that way.
I wish it was possible to *talk* to them under flag of parley. But since we *can't*--
--better to win the battle *quickly*--
--and sort out the *finer* details afterwards.
Oh this can *not* be for real!




Johnny, the--the water!
Boil it away!



I guess--that's one up--
--to science.

Neat trick, guys.
But I was born in Jersey City.
I already learned how not to breathe.
THOOM
N-no!
Don't do it! Don't--
Sorry.
No comprendo.

Aaaaah! At last.
Vecchiato's wards are breached!

Now we let the pharmacon reach its critical stage. Spirit of gold. Spirits of sulphur and ammonia.
And you see, the dangerous effluents start to build.
Help! Reed! Someone!
HELLLLLLLLP!

The elixir vitae refines itself. It becomes the essence of life.
And what it throws off, in the process, is the essence of death, which I must--

CRUNK

Good morrow to you, signior monster.
Listen, mister, if the Hogwarts' second eleven out there couldn't stop me, good manners ain't gonna cut it.
Are you him? El Diablo?
Ecce homo.
I am the Devil.
OW!
Wha--?
KRRRAK

Bueno. We resume.
NO! NO NO NO NO NO NO!!!
Hush you, little one. It will be quick, and relatively painless.
You see, this presents itself as an exercise in pure logic.
A chain of cause and effect-- with you as one of the links.
"In order to become immortal, I must unleash these terrible, corrosive forces.
"Slip the latch of Hell itself.
"Release the universal solvent.
"An ocean of fire wide enough and deep enough to consume the world.
"My destiny demands it. I am too great to die.
"So the only choice left to me--

"--is *which* world should be consumed."

#41
PACO ROCA

YAAAAAAAARGHHHHHH
...
Hey.
It doesn't even hurt!
There is no reason why it should, my child. There is enough energy here to burn the entire world to a cinder.
But it is not grounded in your body. It merely uses you as a conduit. Passes through you--
--as the necessary first link in a chain--

--which ends somewhere else entirely.

BACK IN 15TH CENTURY MILAN:
My senses returned to me slowly.
Mmnuuh!
Riding on a flood of pain and humiliation.
And fear.
Come on, pal.
Say a magic word or something.
Give me an excuse.

Johnny, don't hurt him. He's not our enemy!
Check your dictionary, Reed. He tried to kill us.
But these men are wearing the Sforza crest. And Duke Sforza rules this city.
They're medieval cops.
This--this is Diablo's tower? Il--torre di Diablo?
Si. Vero. You speak--tongue of English?
Yeah. What's going on here? Why did you attack us?
Look at the sky. El Diablo reaches out for immortality and omnipotence. He refines the elixir vitae.
We thought you to be with him. For this--apologies.
But we must stop him, while still there is time.
Then what are we waiting for?
X marks the spot, right?

MANHATTAN, THE PRESENT:
Pull these men *back*, Corporal. And evacuate the street.
Yes sir. We've got *fire engines* coming through.
They're gonna try to *douse* that thing.

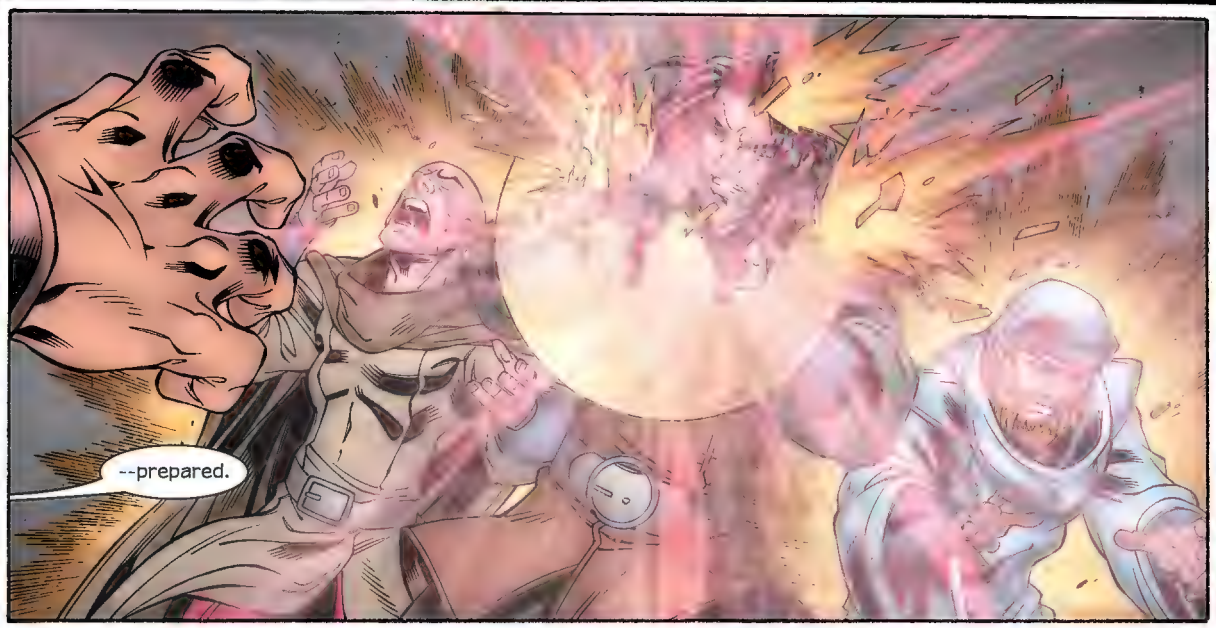
It's not *working.* Spivey, we've got to move the engines further *back.*
If it gets any hotter, the *fuel tanks* are gonna--

NEW YORK
FIRE
DEPARTMENT

And now the elixir comes. Esimio!
A few minutes more, and it's done. My child, I'm eternally in your--
Likk!
<You must break off your experiment, Dottore Diablo.>
<Though I applaud your scientific curiosity, I cannot approve of your methods.>
Ah, Vecchiato, my old enemy. And my reluctant allies, I Quattro Fantasticos.
Or rather, three of them. You are, of course, stepping in the fourth.
Oh--oh, no.
God, no.

Reed, look out!!!
Ah, you raise your scudo subdolo against me-- your invisible shield.
But if I focus my power of transmutation on the shield itself, what then?
Which will be stronger, my magic or yours?
Yes.
That is what I thought.

Gloves are off.
You're gonna fry.
I am obliged to a scientist from your time--Joseph Priestley--for the revelation that fire needs oxygen in order to burn.
Just as you need it both to propagate your fire--
--and to breathe.
Per ipsius pulveris virtutem--
--utque per samguem Christi--
--omniumque sanctorum benedictionem--
Tchah! You come into my house, Vecchiato, with your conjurations and your petty powders.
See you not what it is you face? Has hope quite blinded you?
You took me once, by surprise. You find me now--


--prepared.

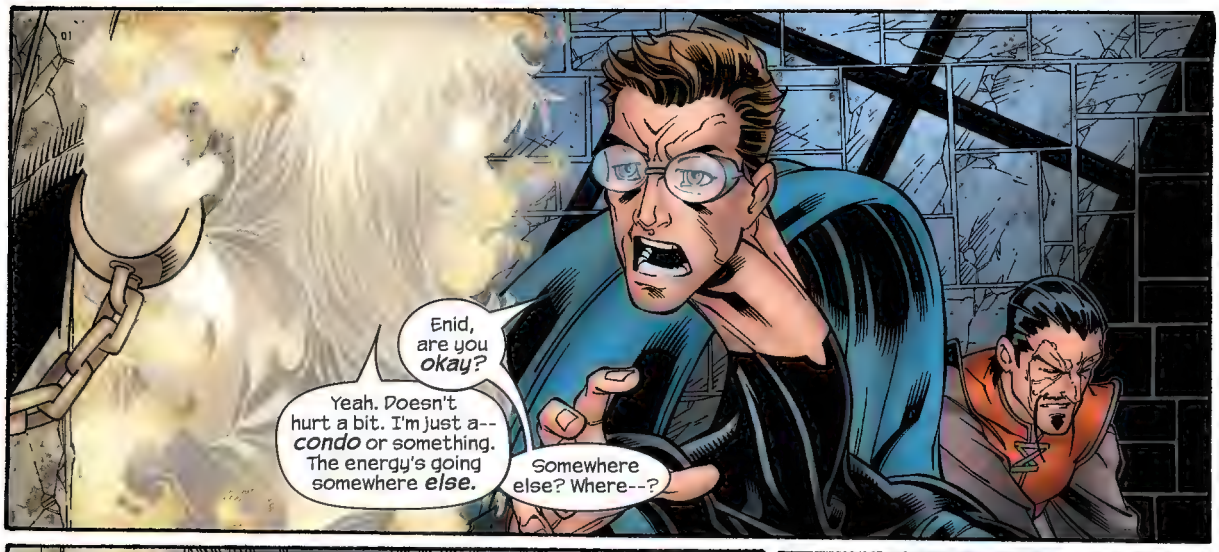
You are *ornaments* to your profession, gentlemen.
And as ornaments I shall *keep* you.

Ah, but look at *this!* Vecchiato is a man of might and will. Somehow, he is still *alive.* Just a little.
Shall I understudy God's mercy and *release* him from his pain?

No.
I think *not.*

I was trying to utter an incantation.
Without success, for my nerves seemed frozen and my mind was a fading coal. But dimly, through the gathering dark--
--I heard the creak of tortured stone.
GRRRKKKKK
KROOOOM
Notevole! You do not need to breathe?
Not so much.
Well, I am glad. It's right that it should come down to this.
The two brother souls, face-to-face. The symmetry is very pleasing.
I'm not following you.
No? But it is obvious.

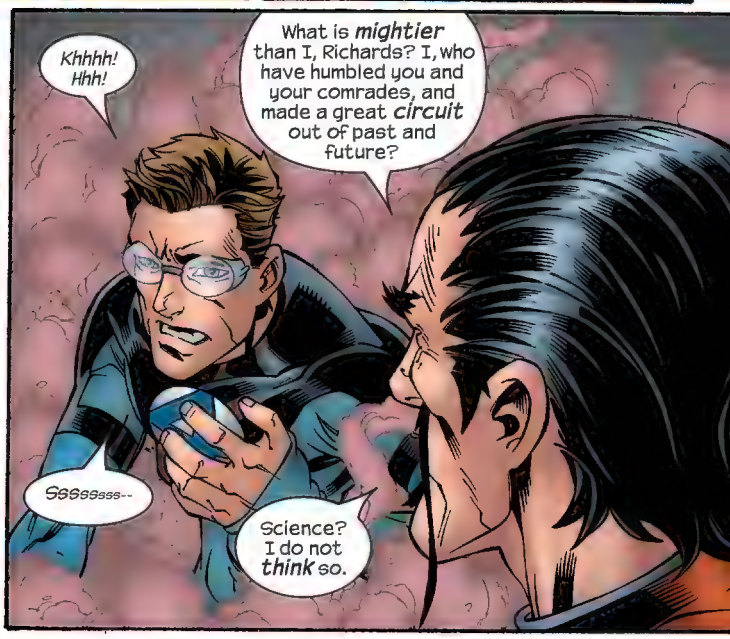
We are both alchemists, Reed Richards. Both seekers into the mysteries of the universe.
The only difference is that I do not flinch from what I see there.
You think that's the difference?
Vero.
That's not the difference.
The difference is that I'm SANE!
WHUKK


Enid, are you okay?
Yeah. Doesn't hurt a bit. I'm just a-- condo or something. The energy's going somewhere else.
Somewhere else? Where--?

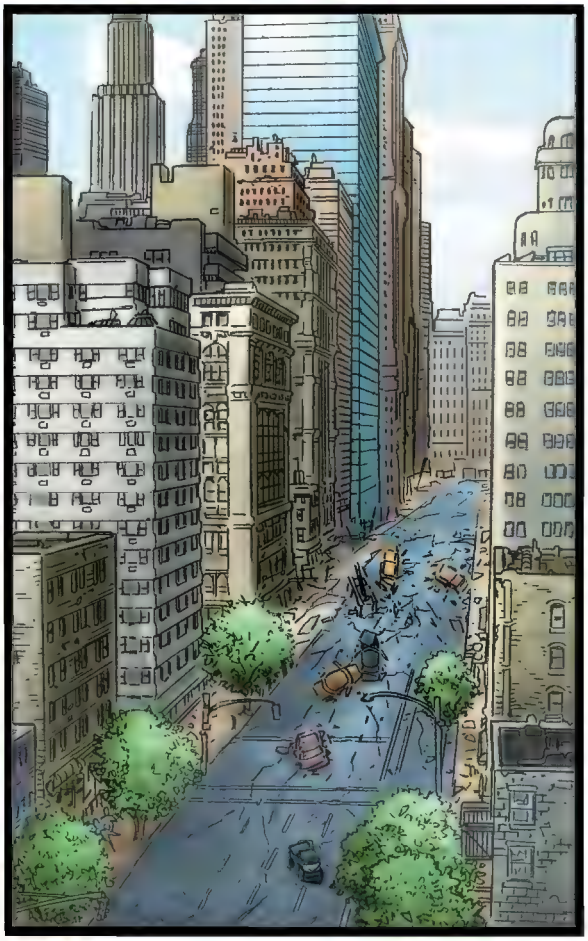
Guuuh!
REEEEEEEEED!

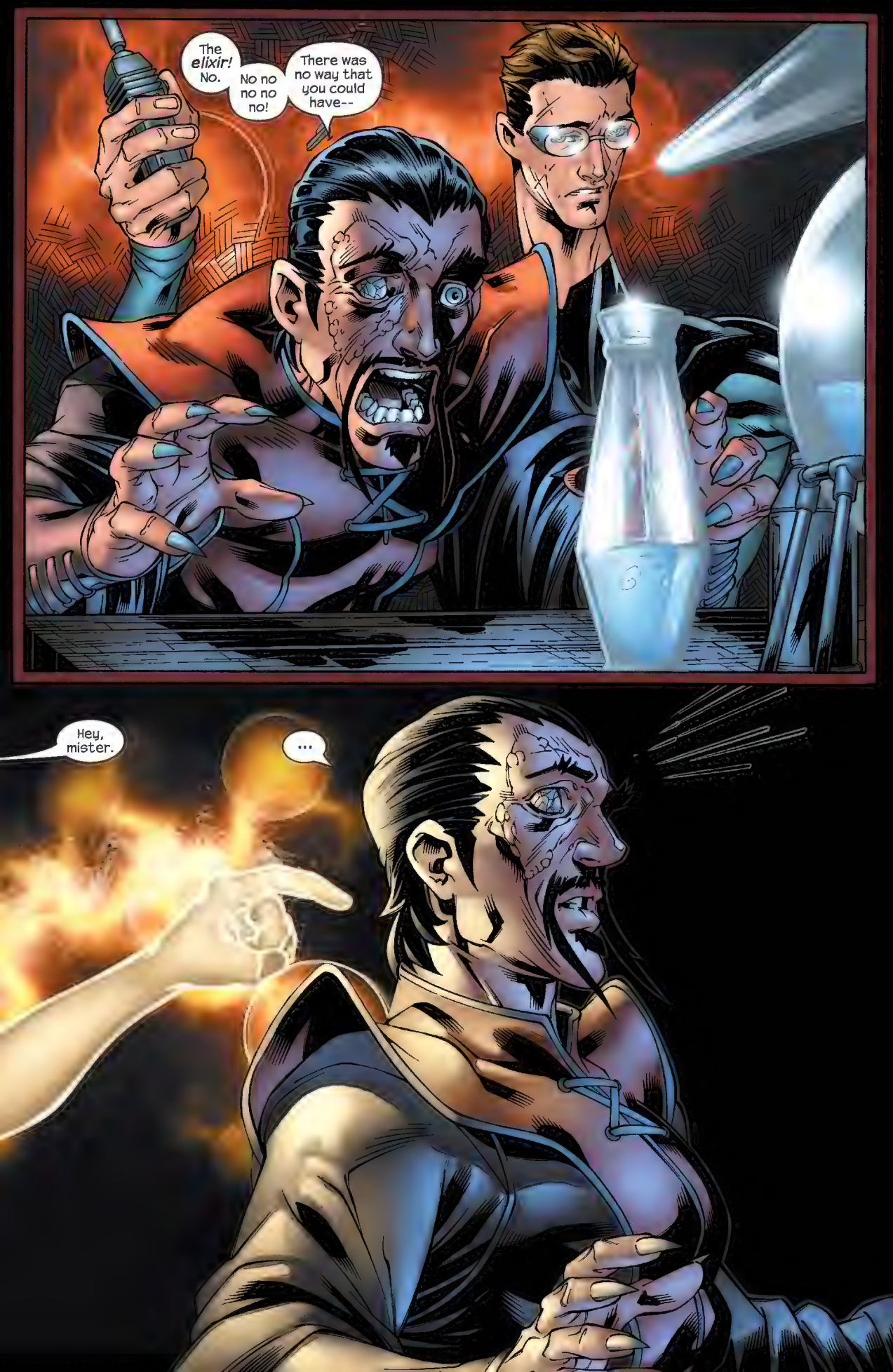
See, Dottore Richards? You do need to breathe.
But sadly, that is no longer an option.

To answer your earlier question, I'm sending the energy to your city of the future. It burns, even as we speak.
That is why I did not close the time-gate behind you.

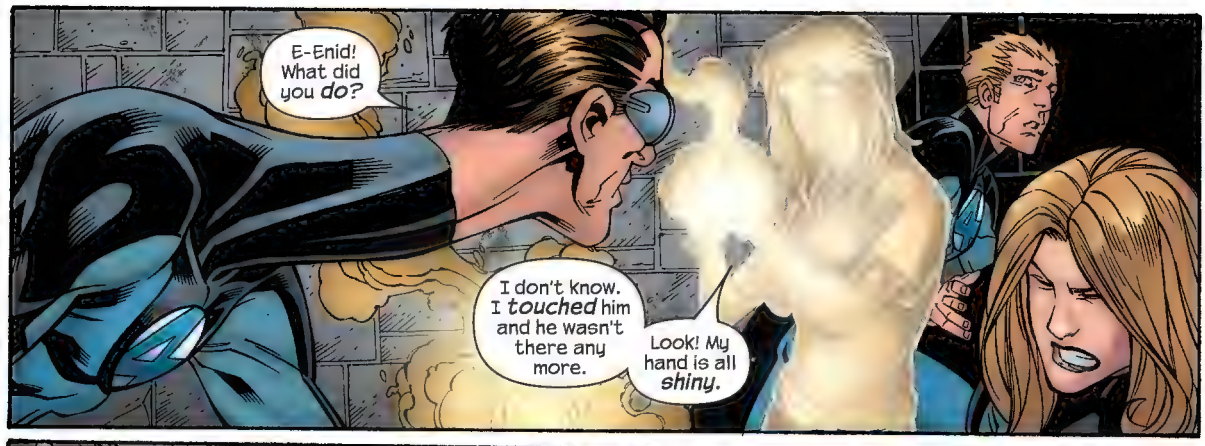

Khhhh! Hhh!
What is mightier than I, Richards? I, who have humbled you and your comrades, and made a great circuit out of past and future?
Ssssssss--
Science? I do not think so.

--circuit--
--breaker--
CLECK
CLECKCLECKCLECKCLEC
BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE
KRAKOOOOOOOOOOOM

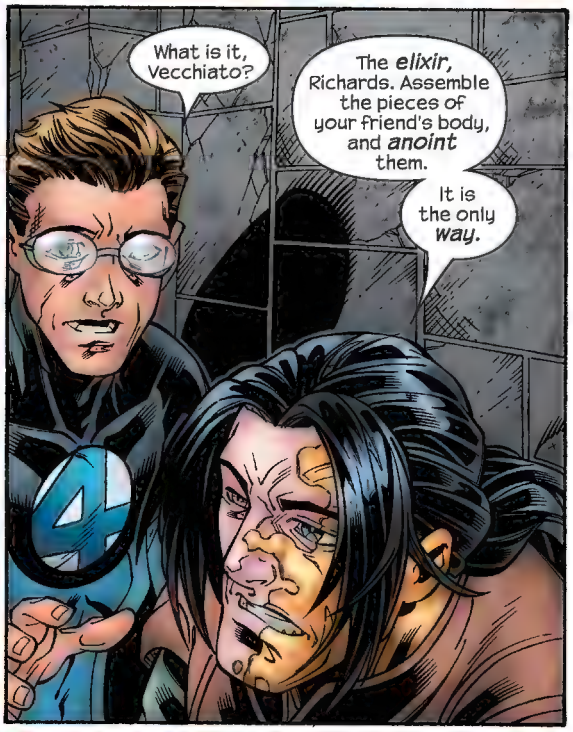



The elixir! No.
No no no no no!
There was no way that you could have--
Hey, mister.
...

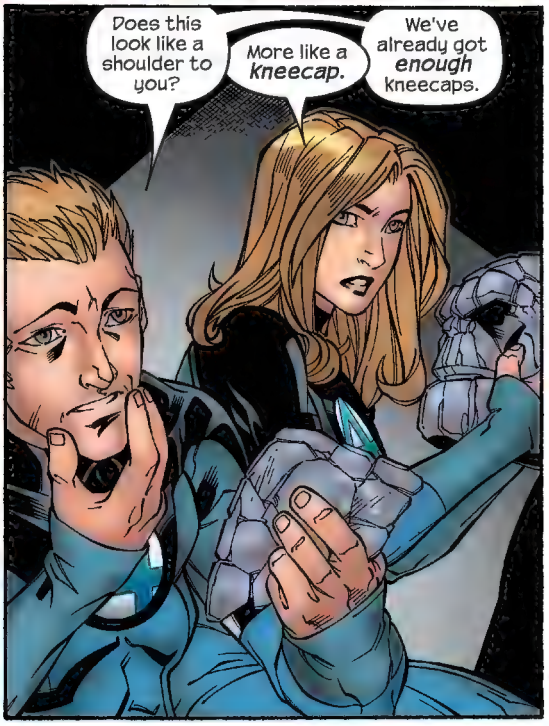
Pick on someone your *own* size.


E-Enid! What did you do?
I don't know. I touched him and he wasn't there any more.
Look! My hand is all shiny.

My God! Dad!
Don't--don't touch them. Let them wake on their own, and they will be well.
Bring me Dottore Richards! I must speak with him!


What is it, Vecchiato?
The elixir, Richards. Assemble the pieces of your friend's body, and anoint them.
It is the only way.

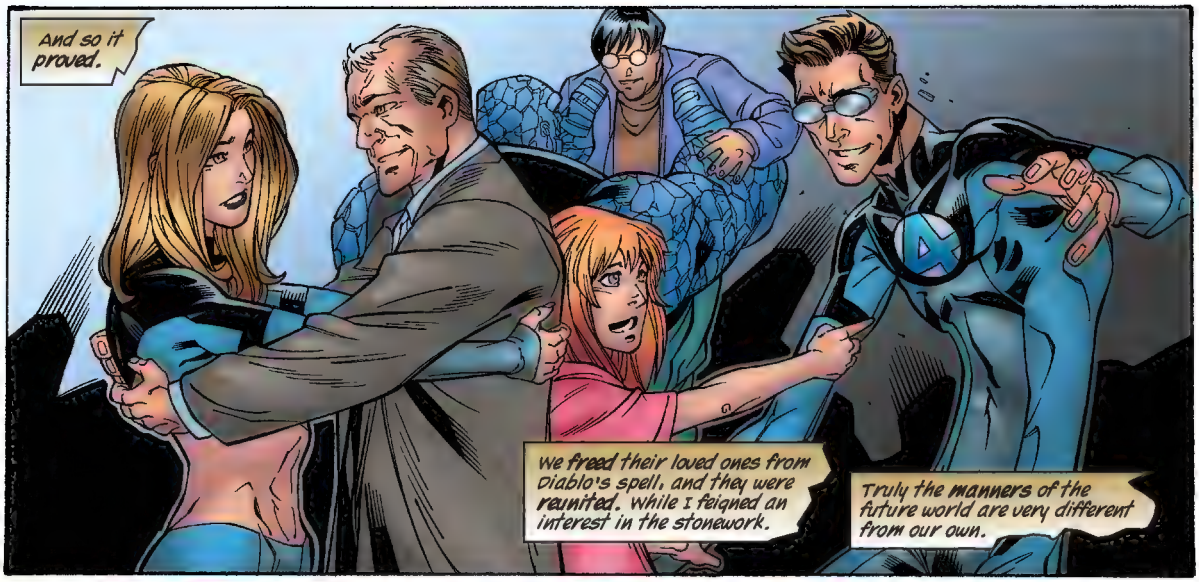
Rely on magic?
You got any better ideas?
No, but--
Then let's give it a shot.

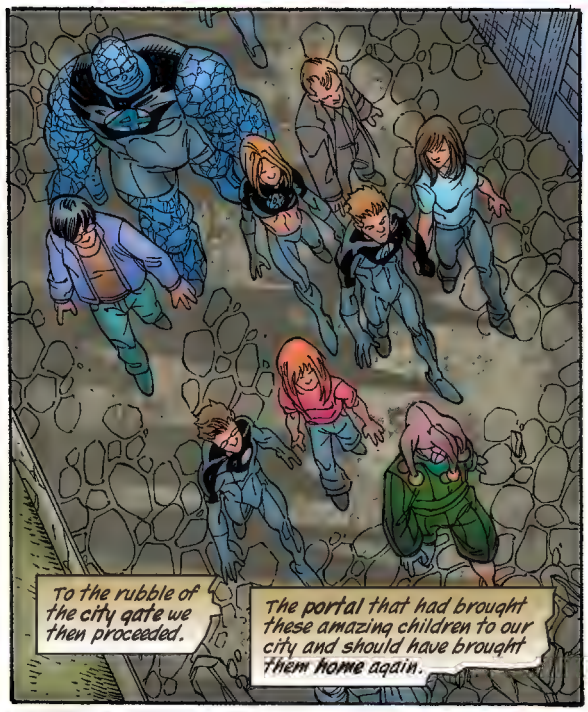

Does this look like a shoulder to you?
More like a kneecap.
We've already got enough kneecaps.

Let's just hope that we have enough of Vecchiato's elixer...
Urm...

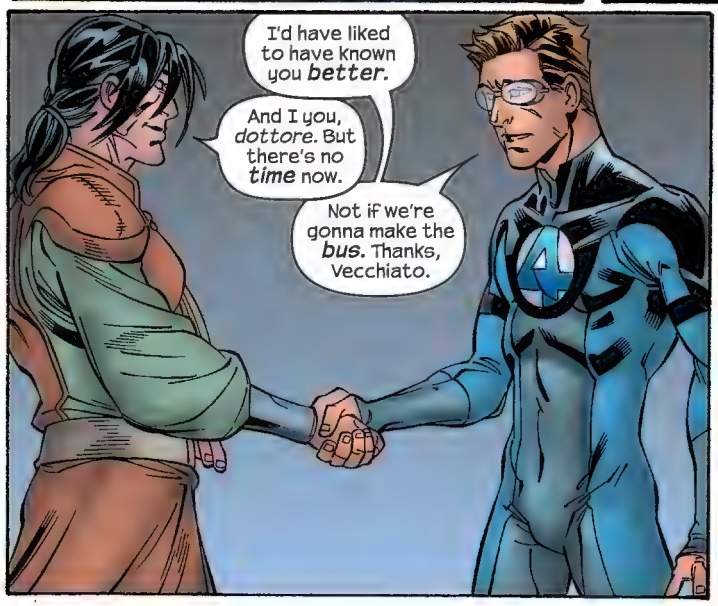
Ben! Man, it's good to have you back! How do you *feel?*
Blue.
No, seriously.
This isn't serious? Look at me! I'm *blue!*
I look like that *Nightnurse* guy out of the freakin' X-Men!

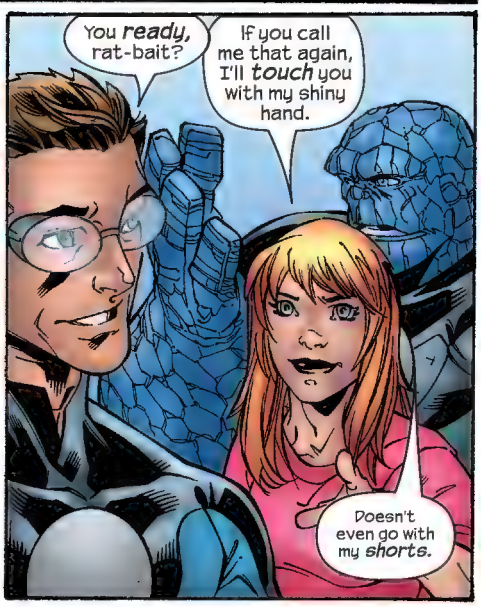
Vecchiato, there's a little of the elixir left. I can--
Dio, no! I don't want-- to live on-- like this.
Better to die. It will not be long now.
Richards, what's going on here?
We won, Lieutenant. But we're stranded here.
Unless the alchemists can send us home.
My friends are dead. With their help-- and at the height of my power--I might have pierced the veil of time to the tune of one year.
As I am now--an hour, at best.
Great.
Then I think we're good to go.

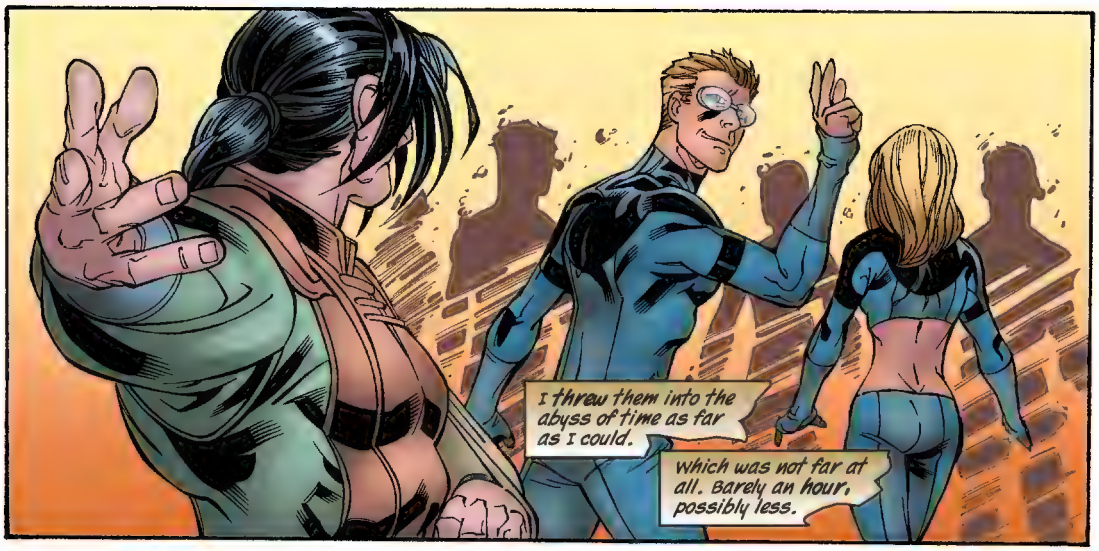

And so it proved.
We freed their loved ones from Diablo's spell, and they were reunited. While I feigned an interest in the stonework.
Truly the manners of the future world are very different from our own.

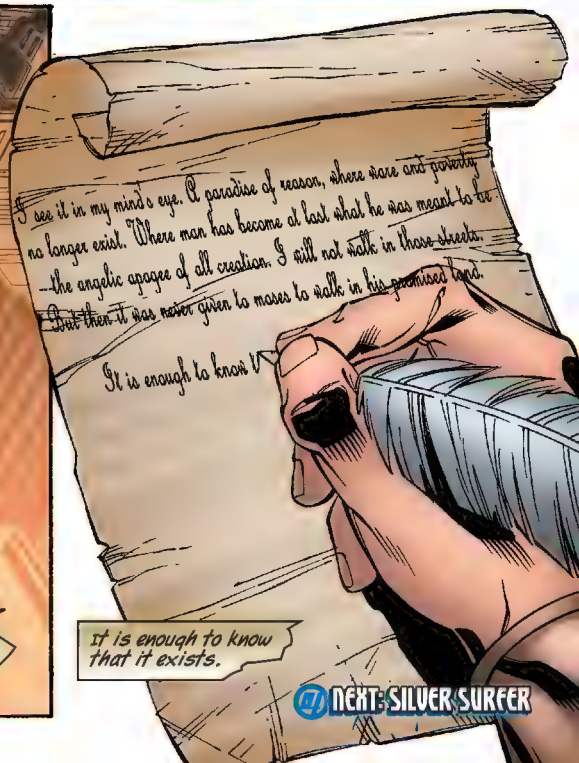

To the rubble of the city gate we then proceeded.
The portal that had brought these amazing children to our city and should have brought them home again.

Astonishing. That you could call the thunder down out of the sky on this place, and yet not find your own way home.
It wasn't thunder. I left an electrical generator sitting right here.
All I did was shove it into overload.


I'd have liked to have known you better.
And I you, dottore. But there's no time now.
Not if we're gonna make the bus. Thanks, Vecchiato.


You ready, rat-bait?
If you call me that again, I'll touch you with my shiny hand.
Doesn't even go with my shorts.





NEXT: SILVER SURFER

#42

THE BAXTER BUILDING, MIDTOWN MANHATTAN.
What are you telling us here? What--what garbage are you feeding us?
Look, I'm saying this for the last time.
I want my daughter. And I want her now.
And we're right with you, mister. Where's our Donna?
What have you done with her?
Umm, there's--very little I can add to what I've already told you.
Which is nothing.
Which is that your daughter, Mr. Richards, and yours, Mr. and Mrs. Lynch--along with a Mrs. Rachel Grimm--were, um, involved in a temporal anomaly.
Our own Doctor Storm was affected, too--which is why I find myself, um, in charge here.
They spent some time in medieval Milan. They could have been exposed to smallpox. Bubonic plague. Tuberculosis...
You can't hold Enid without our permission.
W-well--a period of quarantine is mandated by--
Don't give me that legalistic crap, or I swear I'll put my fist through your--
Stop it, Dad...

...please.
You.
Oh, Reed, where is she?
Enid's fine, Mom. They're just checking us all for bugs, and it takes a while.
Well, that and-- there is kind of more to it, but it's hard to explain.
She was exposed to some weird kind of energy, and we don't know if it's still--if she's got--
You think I'm stupid, boy?
No, Dad. I-- I don't.
Then don't talk to me like I'm stupid.
Our daughter got disappeared right out of our house.
We brought her back.
Because of you. She got taken on account of you.
N-no. That's not--
So because we had the lousy luck to get stuck with you, we don't ever get to have a normal life.
Is that how it's gonna be for us?

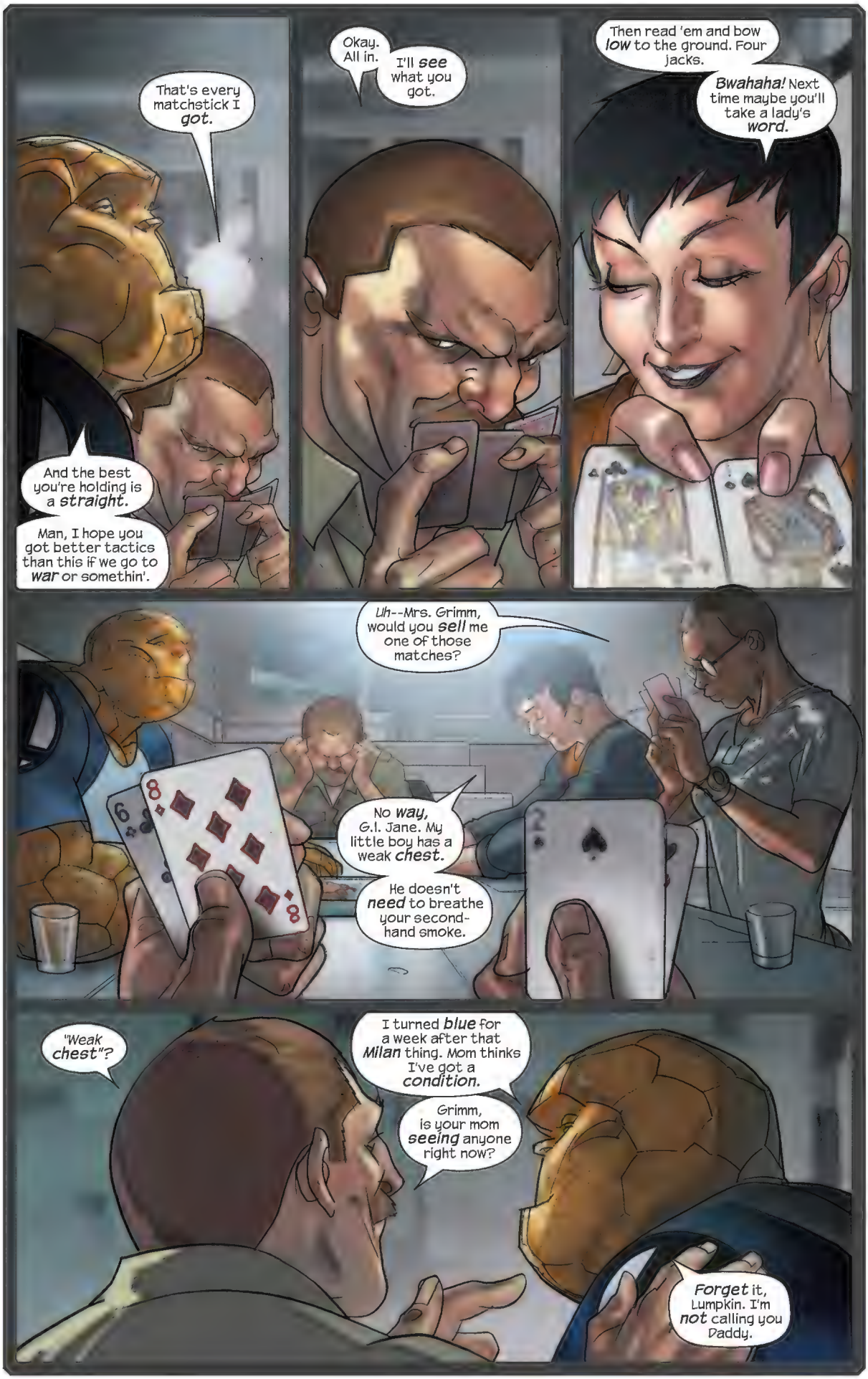
Reed, your father didn't *mean* that the way it sounded.
I meant what I *said.*
Darling, come back. Please don't *take* it like this. Reed--
Keep out
Hey, babe. You scan *me* for plague-bearing parasites and I'll scan *you.*
Not now, Sue. Maybe later.

WHUMP
Let me into my lab.
Talk to me.
Get your stupid force field out of my face and let me into my lab.
Was it something your dad said?
If I wanted to talk about it, that's what I'd be doing. Let me in, Sue.
Your dad is the biggest moron in the known universe.
You shouldn't let him get to you.
I've got work to do, that's all.
Cool.
I'll drape myself over your equipment and look awestruck.
Okay. Whatever.
I don't want to argue about it.

You're still working on the volatile cubic *lutke?*
Cuboid volitional lattice. Yes.
I thought you had it *working* now.
Yeah, the cube *itself* is functional. But I couldn't find a *power* source for it.
What does it do?
It's a *converter.* Energy into matter. Matter into energy.
Hmmph. Handy little item.
In theory it can do *anything.*
In *practice* it takes two million ergs of input energy to heat a test tube full of *water* by half a degree.
Making it the *least* formidable weapon in human history.
So you need a bigger *battery?*
Or a better *conversion* rate. I've tried *EM* oscillation. Crystal-gel capacitors. Even bio-organic *feedback.* Nothing works.
Bummer. So what's *next?*

I thought I'd bottle a *star*.

I won't!
I won't I won't I won't and you can't make me.
Enid, I just want another blood sample. It's to see if you've got any nasty--
I need my blood to make all the oxygen go everywhere in my body. And you've had lots.
If you don't leave me alone, I'll make my shiny hands and burn you up.
Pair of threes. No help.
Feh. I'll fold.
What about you, Lieutenant?
See and raise, Mrs. Grimm. Ten to you.
Fold.
Fold. Mom, would it kill you to bottom-deck me an ace once in a while?
Heh heh heh! Oh, now it's heating up.
Okay, Mister Lumpkin, sir. Let's go for a ride.
I'll see your ten, and raise you--thirty.


That's every matchstick I got.
And the best you're holding is a straight.
Man, I hope you got better tactics than this if we go to war or somethin'.
Okay. All in.
I'll see what you got.
Then read 'em and bow low to the ground. Four jacks.
Bwahaha! Next time maybe you'll take a lady's word.
Uh--Mrs. Grimm, would you sell me one of those matches?
No way, G.I. Jane. My little boy has a weak chest.
He doesn't need to breathe your second-hand smoke.
"Weak chest"?
I turned blue for a week after that Milan thing. Mom thinks I've got a condition.
Grimm, is your mom seeing anyone right now?
Forget it, Lumpkin. I'm not calling you Daddy.

These are stars?
Sure.
They're not shiny.
They're in another universe. I just set the computer to display energy signatures and luminance data.
Pick one.
Gee, it's so hard to decide. They all look so good.
Okay, that one.
Right there.
Stellar object PZ17-24718-81. Good choice.
That little baby has a core temp of twenty million degrees.
So what happens now?
The shiny part.

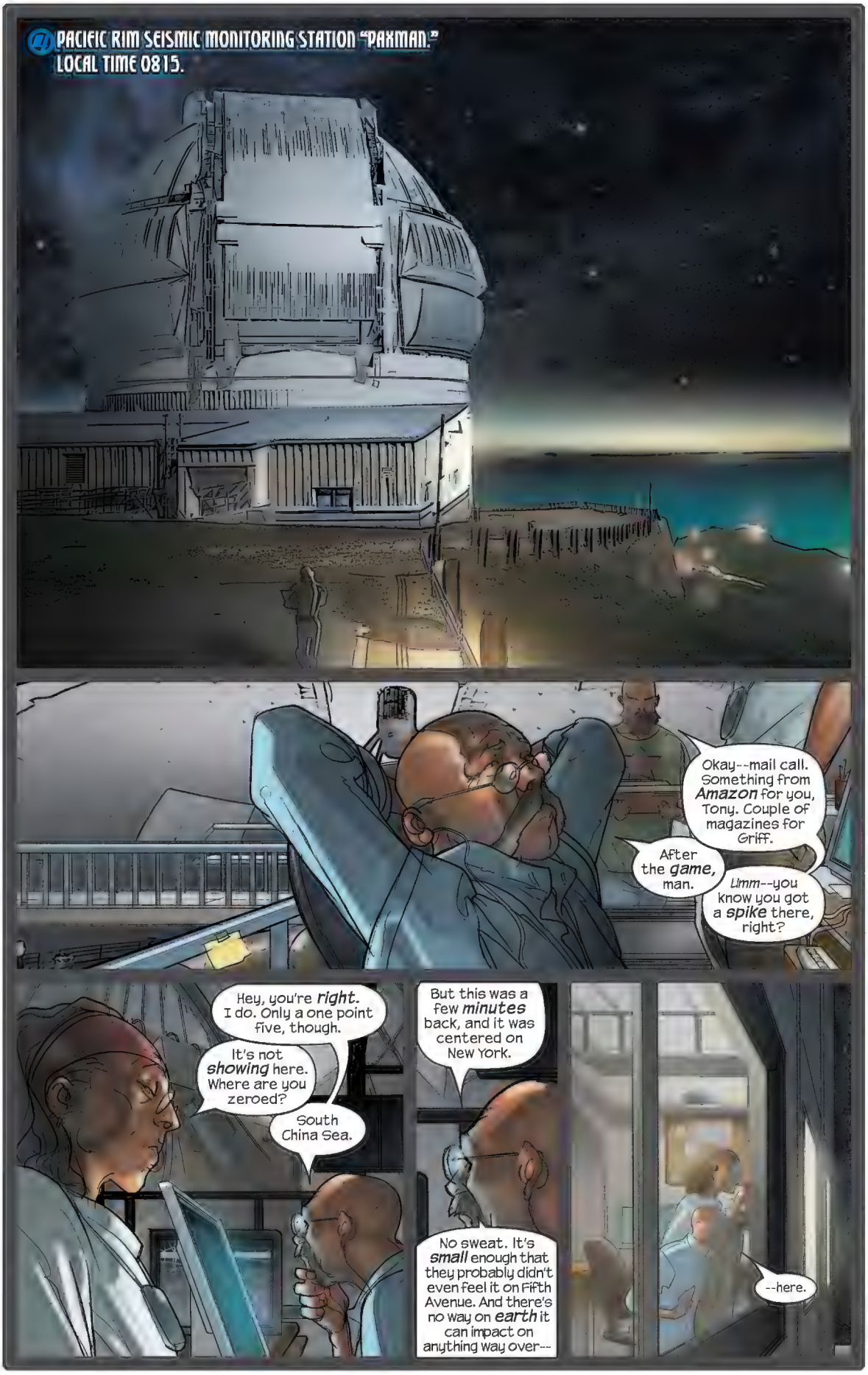
CHUNK
CHUNK
CHUNK
FWAAASH
Way to go, Reed. You couldn't have warned me there'd be a "FWAAASH"?
There-- shouldn't have been. Something's wrong.
What kind of something?
I don't know.
But I think we're gonna find out.

Okay, I have to say that didn't look too good.
I want you to see if you can hold it for longer this time--and without any signs of breathlessness.
Okay, let's give it a shot.
Mmmmmmmmm
Much better, Donna. Now I'm going to see how your heartbeat's doing.
Get that thing away from me, Johnny Storm!
Trust me, my dad's a doctor.
Man, it's been three days. I bet my mom and dad are going crazy. How much longer are they gonna keep us here?
Why? You getting bored?
Not yet.
Show me something else.
Like what?
Like I dunno. A spaceship or a-- a giant robot.

I mean this whole set-up is like something out of a sci-fi movie.
I want to see something incredible.
You're looking at it.
More incredible.
Wow! Tough audience.
I'm serious, Johnny.
Well, don't be. I try to rule serious right out of my life.
Yeah, I noticed that.
It's like you're afraid of your own feelings or something.
What?
Don't psychoanalyze me, babe. It's not what you're here for.
Pretty much killed the mood there, didn't I?

DENGFENG STAR OBSERVATORY PLATFORM. HENAN. CHINA.
LOCAL TIME 0408.
<Dr. Zhang. Please--would you check my observations?>
<They don't make any sense to me!>
<Half the stars in the Eastern sky occulted?
<Something bigger than a hundred suns, eclipsing them all? Or a fault in radio telescope Bixia? Which do we think?>
<It's going to be difficult to verify, in either case.>
<Telescopes Argus, Bixia and Caishen have all left their orbits. And the moon-->
<What about the moon?>
<Nothing, Professor Zhang. Except--it ought to be full. But it isn't.>
<"What's big enough to cast a shadow on the moon?">

This isn't good.
It isn't?
No. It really isn't.
Okay. But are we talking "I just wasted half an hour" not-good or "we're all gonna die" not-good?
Somewhere in the middle.
"I think I bent reality all out of shape" not-good.
The power readouts haven't moved. The link is in place but the cube isn't charging up.
It's like PZ17-24718-81 isn't radiating. Which would have to mean it's--
...
Reed? I need an adjective or something.
It's pink? It's portable? It's coming soon to a theater near us?
It's not a star.
It's something else.


4 PACIFIC RIM SEISMIC MONITORING STATION "PAXMAN."
LOCAL TIME 0815.
Okay--mail call. Something from Amazon for you, Tony. Couple of magazines for Griff.
After the game, man.
Umm--you know you got a spike there, right?
Hey, you're right. I do. Only a one point five, though.
It's not showing here. Where are you zeroed?
South China Sea.
But this was a few minutes back, and it was centered on New York.
No sweat. It's small enough that they probably didn't even feel it on Fifth Avenue. And there's no way on earth it can impact on anything way over--
--here.

LONDON.
SYDNEY.
KINSHASA.

NEW YORK.
Getting a little crazy out there.
Yeah.
Is it just me, or are we taking more than our fair share of that lightning?

This building is more effectively earthed and shielded than anywhere else in New York, Ben.
But I have to admit, I've never seen a storm quite like--
KKKKKKKKKKK
KRESCHHHH
It's all right, sweetheart. It's all right.
Get these civilians into the basement.
But sir, the quarantine regs--
If you live long enough to die of bubonic plague, I'll apologize.

How can it *not* be a star? You said it had an internal *temperature* of twenty million degrees!
It *does.* But it doesn't have a *gravity well.*
That's why all this is *happening.*
The idea was to siphon *fusion* power from the star's core. But it's not *anchored* in any way.
So instead, we're reeling it in. Across a hundred different universes. I'm trying to cut the link but it's not letting me!

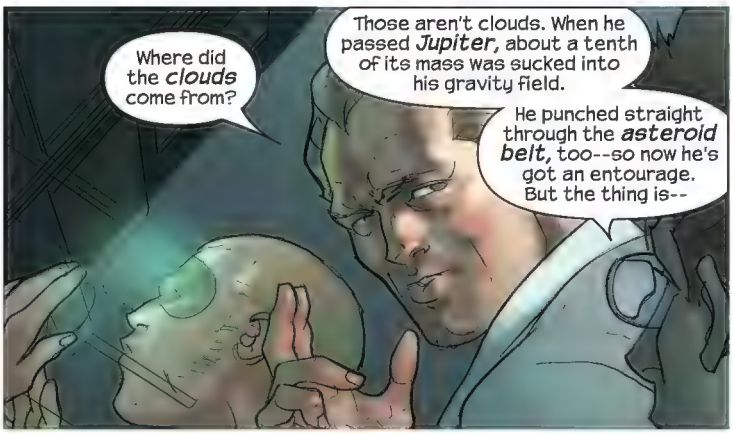
This is what we latched onto?
I guess.
It's not much like a star.
No, it's not.
But it must have looked like a star, to my scanner.
So it has to contain energy on a stellar scale.
You know what it looks like?
No. What?
A surfboard.
Funny, Sue. But this doesn't make any sense.
Is today state-the-obvious day?
There's an energy signature in it, but it's not off the scale or anything.
This isn't it. It was something else that we hooked.
And it hasn't arrived yet.

#43

Okay, Richards. You said you had something to tell us. So tell.
Yeah!
In words of one syllable.
Or even less. So I can get it.
I tried to plug my cube-device into a star. As a--
--as a power source. But somehow, I've drawn in a living entity.
"Device" is two syllabubs, Reed. Stop cheating!
Ent--it--y. That's--
Little girl, you need to go some-place where you'll be safe.
Safe from what?
Me.
What do you mean by "drawn in," Reed? Drawn in from where?
From another level of the universal stack.
And how is this connected to the earth tremors and tidal waves?
Take a look.
My--my God!
That's not possible!

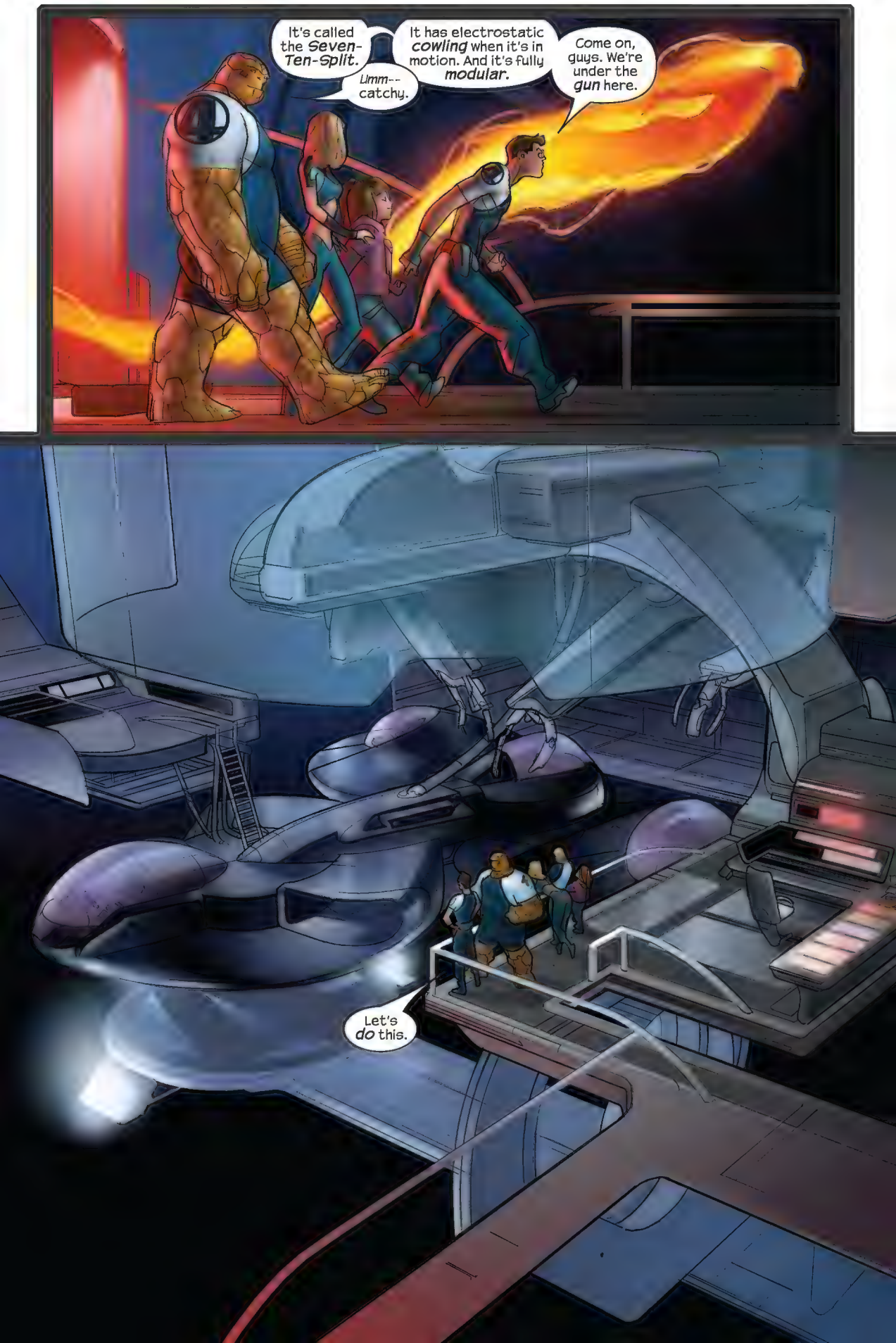
"He's actually ***shrinking,*** Doctor Storm. He was a couple of light-years across when I first ***saw*** him.

"Now he masses about the same as a small ***planet.***"



Get the Triskelion.
Doctor Storm--
Code Mirror Tango. This is the Baxter Building. I need to talk to Colonel Fury.
Listen, I can handle this.
How?
I told you he's shrinking. Even if he doesn't burn up in the atmosphere, he'll be a lot smaller when he hits the ground.
Manhattan. When he hits Manhattan.
Please, Lieutenant. I broke this, so let me fix it.
I'll give you five minutes' lead time, Richards.
Then I place the call.
Hey, Reed. What's with the surfboard?
It's a cosmic surf-board. It came from outer space.
Seriously. Come on.
I'm telling you, it's a cosmic--
Fine. Be like that.

Where are we *going?*
The *hangar* deck. We'll need to do this from the air.
Go wait in the *TV lounge,* Enid.
What's on the hangar deck? We *trashed* the Fantasti-Car.
I've been working on a V.T.O.L. troop transport. We can use that. Enid--
I'm coming *with* you.
You are *not* coming with us.
I'm a *super hero* now. I go all *shiny.*
I don't *care.* Run and play.
No.
I'll tell *Dad.*
I'll tell him you *made* me go with you. He always believes me.
I'll drop you out of a *window.*
I'm a super hero. I can probably *fly.*
This plane can only take four--
PING
Fine. Whatever.
Thank you.
What are you calling *this* one, Reed? The *Wonder-Bus?*


It's called the Seven-Ten-Split.
Umm-- catchy.
It has electrostatic cowling when it's in motion. And it's fully modular.
Come on, guys. We're under the gun here.
Let's do this.

What does "fully modular" mean?
Made of lots of little pieces. Like Lego.
Jeez!
Okay, I've got the vector.
Superimposing the Manhattan street-grid--he comes down here.
So what do we do?
We meet him high up, and you deflect him with your force field. Into the East River.
Reed, I don't know if I can. Something that big, coming in so fast--
You'll be fine. And Johnny can slow him with a nova blast.
Seriously? We'll be sprinkling his ashes on the East River.
Would you all just--stop asking questions and do it?
We mess up here and people are gonna die. And it will be my fault.
"If he can burn, he'll burn before he gets to us. If not--
" --he can take anything we can throw at him."

Okay, this is where we split up.
TEK TEK TEK
You do your stuff. I'll track him from here and reel you in again when we're done.
Gotta say, Reed, I'm loving the ride.
The pep talk--not so much.
He's coming in from over your left shoulder.
Mass still decreasing, but that means he's getting faster. You see him?
Yeah, we got him. Ready, sis?
No.
Okay. Then I'll go first.

FWAAASHHHHHH
It's--not working!
He's not moving like a meteor or a missile.
He's pushing! He's pushing against me!

Reed, launch me.
What? Ben, they're a thousand feet up.
So? Launch me straight at him. If I hit him full-on, I'll maybe kill some of his momentum.
I'm the only one who can do that and survive.
All right. Yeah. Let's try it.
Sue, Ben is coming through. Turn your force field off in three seconds.
Two.
"One.
"Zero."
WHOOOM

Sue, the debris!
Teach your grandmother, Reed.
And you and me still need to have a little talk about that "stop asking questions" line.

Ben! Are you all right?
Yeah, but I busted your modular thingumajig.
Unless it's still modular when the pieces are the size of a toothpick.
Okay, I think we're good.
Define "good," Reed.
Almost back to where we were before I screwed up.
Works for me.

Where to now?
Back to the B.B., I guess. We'll pick up some salvage equipment and see if we can--
VEE VEE VEE VEE
Sorry. Let me get that.
Richards.
Colonel Fury!
I just got done talking to your handlers at the Baxter. It was not a happy conversation.
Colonel, I'm really sorry. This was just--impossible to predict.
Yeah? Then I guess it was pretty bad science, wasn't it?
Like drinking poison to see if the label's right.
Richards, get this straight. I tolerate the Baxter Building because it gives General Ross some cool toys to play with and keeps him from trying to second-guess me.
But I'm seriously thinking it might be time to put the toys back in the box.
W-wind up the think tank? Colonel, you can't! This was just me--just my mistake.
Tell it to my field commander.
She's half a click south of you, at the Waldhouse Basin docks. Waiting to debrief you.

"I've told her she can use any *implements* she happens to favor."
Reed Richards, boy genius.
Captain Danvers.
We *made* the jolly silver giant as soon as he showed up, out past Pluto.
Scrambled six I.C.B.M.s, but the *telemetry* went haywire because his size and *mass* kept shifting.
Then we got the call from *Lumpkin* at the Baxter.
So now it's *S.H.I.E.L.D.'s* baby. You're handing over to *me.*
No, I'm *not* handing--
You're handing over to *me.* And I'm asking you before I send you home if you have the faintest *idea* what this thing is.
No, I don't. But I can tell you that his internal temperature is twenty million degrees.
And that he probably met the *Gah Lak Tus* swarm once because *Gah Lak Tus* modeled its *antibody* drones on him.
And we're *not* going home.

You've been fishing in other universes.
So?
So I'm thinking "boy genius" doesn't cover it. Why did he shrink?
I don't know.

But I think-- it might be because he was adjusting to our reality.
Physical laws could be very different in the universe I pulled him from. Matter could be very different.

And here we are already at the naked speculation, so I guess you can go-- for now.
No, we can't.
Hendricks, get those micro-subs into the water.
Captain Danvers, listen to me.

If this goes bad, you might need superhumans on hand.
Let us stay. We'll keep out of the way unless you tell us to intervene.

Thanks. We've got that angle pretty much covered, too.
And I'd say you've met your reckless endangerment quotas for today. Wouldn't you agree?

What are we *seeing?*
Nothing so far.
Nothing on IR. No *thermal* gradients, and no--
Oh. Hold the front page. Tracking *movement.*
"Bingo.
"We've *got* him, Captain."

Excuse me. Could I examine him?
Miss, please. Let us do our--
I'm a biologist. And I've met alien life-forms before.
What are you doing?
Making sure he's breathing.
If I generate a weak force field against his pleura, I can feel his lungs inflate.
He's alive, Captain Danvers.
But his internal morphology is--nothing even close to human.
Who would've guessed?
Okay, get that restraint harness over here. Let's lock him down.

Are we just assuming he's hostile?
He survived unprotected re-entry. I'm not giving him the benefit of any doubts right now.
This harness was designed to hold the Hulk.
We're going to have to try to communicate with him.
I wonder if we can use the computer algorithm I wrote for the Nihil entity.
You think you're pretty hot stuff, don't you, boy?
What?
Like, whoever S.H.I.E.L.D. puts onto this job, they're gonna miss something you would have caught.
But you rolled out the red carpet for this thing without even knowing what it was. Which seems to be your usual modus operandi.
So the last word I want to hear from your mouth is "we." Now or ever. Got that?

Pwned!
That isn't even a *word*.
It's *got* to be, dog. Otherwise there's no way to describe what she just *did* to you.
Lock one.
Check.
Lock two.
Check.
Lock thr--
Lock three! Lock *three!*

Jensen, you *copy?*
Yes, captain.
And you've got *visual?* Listen to me.
Lock all *hotware* on my exact position.
If I clench my *fist,* launch everything.
So *very* long!
A million *lifetimes!*

You speak English?
Now I do. There are-- electromagnetic signals in your atmosphere, expressing sounds. They are easy to decipher.
What-- who are you?
I am Norrin Radd, of Zenn-La. Look at this!
There are buildings! Many, many buildings! There must be millions of you.
And this is only one city, on one landmass.
Right. Right. Okay, I'd like you to come with me, to meet some--
I sense chemical gradients. Fossil fuels! How wonderful.
--to meet some people who can tell you more about our culture. And ask you about yours.
Oh, no.
First I have to build the beacon.
The--the what?
The beacon. So that my master can come and claim you.
And make you happier than you have ever been.

Ah. But of course, I was forgetting.
These things have their own logic, and their own protocols.
First there must be death.

#44

This is foolish.
Someone is going to get hurt.
BARAKOOOOOOOM

Listen! Whoever you are--I'm arresting you by the authority of S.H.I.E.L.D.
But I do not recognize your authority.
It's meaningless to me.
You said you wanted to help, Richards.
Don't let him leave.
Ah. The force barrier I met before. You will remove it, please.
Look, we don't want to fight you. But you can't build this beacon without telling us what it's for.
I require no permission. I offer no explanation.
Because you cannot stop it.
FZZZZACKKKK

Nuhhh!
SUE!!!
Oh man, you've been begging for this.
I'm gonna cook you in your own juices!
Heat? As a weapon? I suppose I follow the logic, as far as it goes.
But to one who has walked in the chambers of the stars, yours is but meager warmth.
This is heat.
FWAAAAAAASH

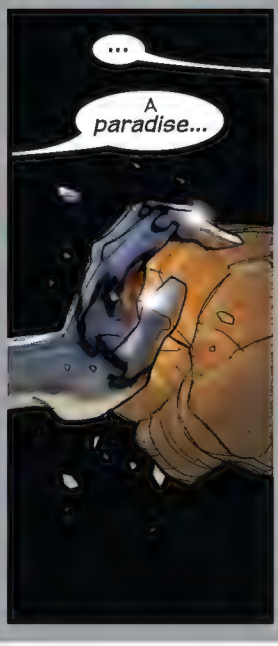
You're not interested in *talking* this through, are you?
Fine. I just thought we should try the *civilized* option first.
But to be honest-- we're cool *either* way.
Yours, Ben!
KRUMP
Finally. Seems a shame to ruin that lovely chrome *finish.*
But what can you do??

Code five! Code five! This is Agent Carol Danvers calling for code five backup!
Colonel, I need the *Ultimates* or Mahr-Vell!

You understand *nothing.* The beacon is my *gift* to you.
Once it's lit, my *master* will come and your world will become a--

WHUKKK

KRUDDD


...
A *paradise...*

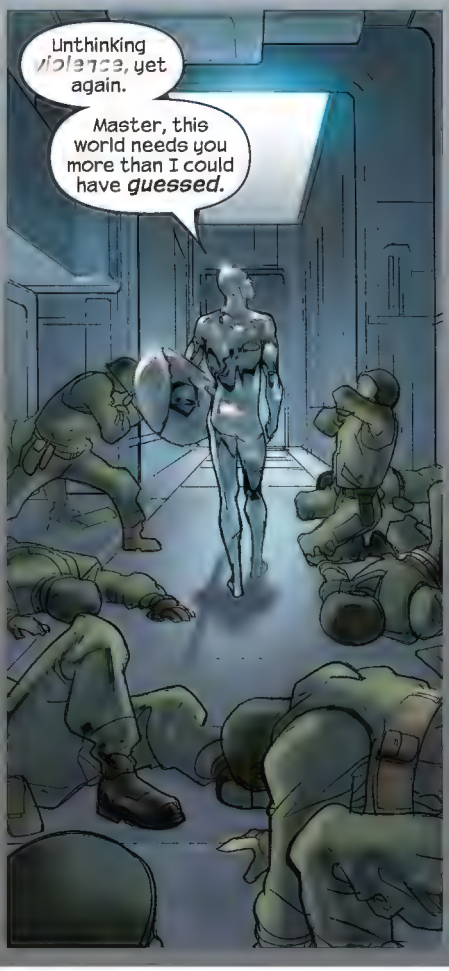
Trust me...
...you'll thank me for this.
Void-glider. Star-threader. I feared you were lost.
This gladdens me, and--completes me.
Pleased to hear it.
CLICK
Maybe you'd like to lead us all in some Beach Boys songs?

This is absurd. I wield the power cosmic.
That must be neat. All I've got is a regular-issue point-thirty-eight.
But I do what I can. Now put your damn hands up on your damn head.
Woman, I have crossed universes to find this world.
I bring you blessing and bounty beyond your power to imagine.
But you reject me.
Aahrr!
You throw my offered kindness in my face, and menace me with-- toys.
I shouldn't let this anger me. But it does.
It does.

Let--me--go, you lousy piece of --
There. Up ahead of us. I sense most of the components I need.
I will set the beacon there. And he will come.
But you, lady--in your stubbornness and pride--you have shown yourself unworthy.
The hatred and fear you embody are poisons in the heart of the world.
And as poison--
--I spit you out.
Fury, if you're still picking up... my signal...
...nail...
...this...
...son of a--

This--okay, Captain Danvers? Don't think I can--get you all the way to the ground.
This is fine, Richards.
This is--great.
Are your feet still standing in Waldhouse Basin?
Yes.
It's--hurting. A lot. I'm gonna snap back now.
Is that--?
Go to the Baxter Building. That's where he's heading.
And Richards...
What?
Thanks for the assist.
You're welcome.
But bringing the Surfer here is still all your fault.
Yeah. I know. See you--soon.

Lieutenant Lumpkin, we've got *incoming,* and it's--
SHOOOOOOM
Oh God, he's here! He's *here!*


Unthinking violence, yet again.
Master, this world needs you more than I could have *guessed.*

And it *will* have you.

Reed, what happened to you? You look terrible.
Are you hurt? Don't try to stand up yet.
I'm fine.
You're not fine. I want to examine you.
Uhh--I hate to interrupt when things are getting steamy...
...but isn't this where we parked the seven-ten-split?
Hey, this is Brooklyn.
What did you expect?
That's crazy. I left the controls in homing mode, but--
Then I guess it went home.
No, someone would still have had to touch the steering column to engage the A.I.
One of the S.H.I.E.L.D. guys?
I don't think so. They were right on the dock when the shockwave from those missiles hit.
It had to be someone else. Someone who stayed back out of the fight.
Oh, no.
Enid.

Master, my quest is over.
I've found a world so perfect for your purposes that you will weep when you see it.
Nobody weeps in my kingdom.
Except for me.
Except for you. And you earned your punishment a thousand times over.
But I do not hold with weeping, Norrin Radd.
You know that.

And now I have earned my release. Look around you, majesty.
This is a world of six billion, riven by wars and disasters. If Zenn-La cast a shadow, this world would be that shadow.
Perhaps. I will examine it. But in the meantime...
...we are observed.
Oop.
It's just a child, majesty. I was aware of her presence.
A child? Well, that's fitting. There is a rightness to it.
Am I to know your name, little one?
I'm Enid Richards. And you're not allowed here.
So go away, or I'll zap you with my shiny hand.
But I'm your king...

...and you love me.
Uhhhhh...!
Majesty! Majesty!
Hah! The same wavelength, even.
You're right, Norrin Radd. Two worlds like two yolks in a single egg.
Then--am I at last to be forgiven?
Your exile is over. But forgiven--no. Not yet.
Enid, will you show me this city of yours?
It's called New York, majesty.
And the world as a whole?
Is the Earth.
Earth. That has a pleasant ring to it.
Come. Let me walk among my new subjects...

"...and accept their adoration."
Reed, slow down. Let Ben and Sue catch up.
There's no time. How could I have been so-- so idiotic?
Enid would only have had to touch the steering column. Just touch it once.
It would have taken her straight back to the hangar at the Baxter. Straight to where he is.
Okay, but if we go in together, we've got a better chance of--
Wait! What's this?
I dunno. Looks like a parade.
On Broadway? At rush hour? I don't think so...
The Sprint Store

"...I think it's something *else.*"

Long live the *King!*
Let me see him! Oh, *please* let me see him!
Praise to him! Praise to his majesty!
Highness, bless my *baby!*
He's blessed just by being here on this day. Name him Temar, after my father.
I will, highness! I will!
It goes **well**, little one. You see how much they **love** me?
Well, duh! How could they **not** love you?
I had to be sure. You could have been an **aberration** of some kind. A throwback.
"And who is **this**?"
"My **brother**."
"Curious. **Freeze** in your places now, my people. This needs to be a **private** conversation.
"Feel no anger or alarm, until I **tell** you to."

Enid, are you okay?
She can't answer you. Don't you feel any urge to cheer or adore me, boy?
Bow down before me? Kiss the ground at my feet?
Not even slightly.
Strange. Very strange.
Why is your frequency so different from these others?
You've done something to Enid's mind...
...to all their minds.

What's his deal?
Mind control. But he's going to hit the reset button. Aren't you?
Why? Because you threaten me with physical force?
I am Revka Temerlune Edifex Scyros III--"the king with no enemies."
Learn to count, psycho-man. You're out by four.
And whatever you're doing to everyone else here, it doesn't work on us.
No. For some reason the four of you think on a different frequency than all these others.
Set them free. Or this is going to get ugly.
It is already ugly. But you're mostly angry with yourself, Reed Richards. For causing all this.
You should stop trying so hard to impress your father. It makes you reckless.

LIFF!
Leave him alone, you big bully! Don't you touch him!
I'm giving you one last warning.
You snap them all out of this or we'll see how your power works when you're nursing a concussion.
No. You won't. Look around you, boy. The expressions on their faces.
All that's holding them back is me.
Touch me again, and I'll let them off the leash. They'll rip you into pieces.
Or turn against you in such numbers that they'll kill themselves in trying.
But the choice is yours. I wouldn't dream of trying to influence it.

All right. What do you **want?**
I **have** what I want.
You have eight million **hostages.** So--I'm guessing you've got some **demands.**

Hostages? Demands? I understand your **language,** but these words make little **sense** here.
Radd. **Attend** me.

You've done well. Almost--you have **atoned** for your crimes.
You will **return** with us to Zenn-La.
Thank you, majesty! **Thank** you!

In fact--that's where we're **all** going. Say goodbye to your **world** now.
To war and poverty and disease. To guilt and fear and hatred.

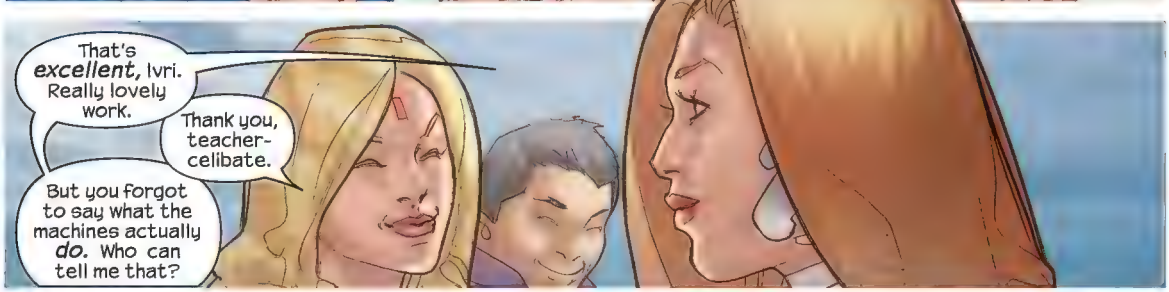
No **way!** We're not going to let you--
Ah, **there** it is! You were dimensionally **reflected,** that's all.
Enough to throw me **off** for a little while. But now we're all **friends,** yes?
Oh, yes!
Forgive us, majesty. We just weren't thinking!
It's forgotten. Leave those regrets **here,** where they belong...

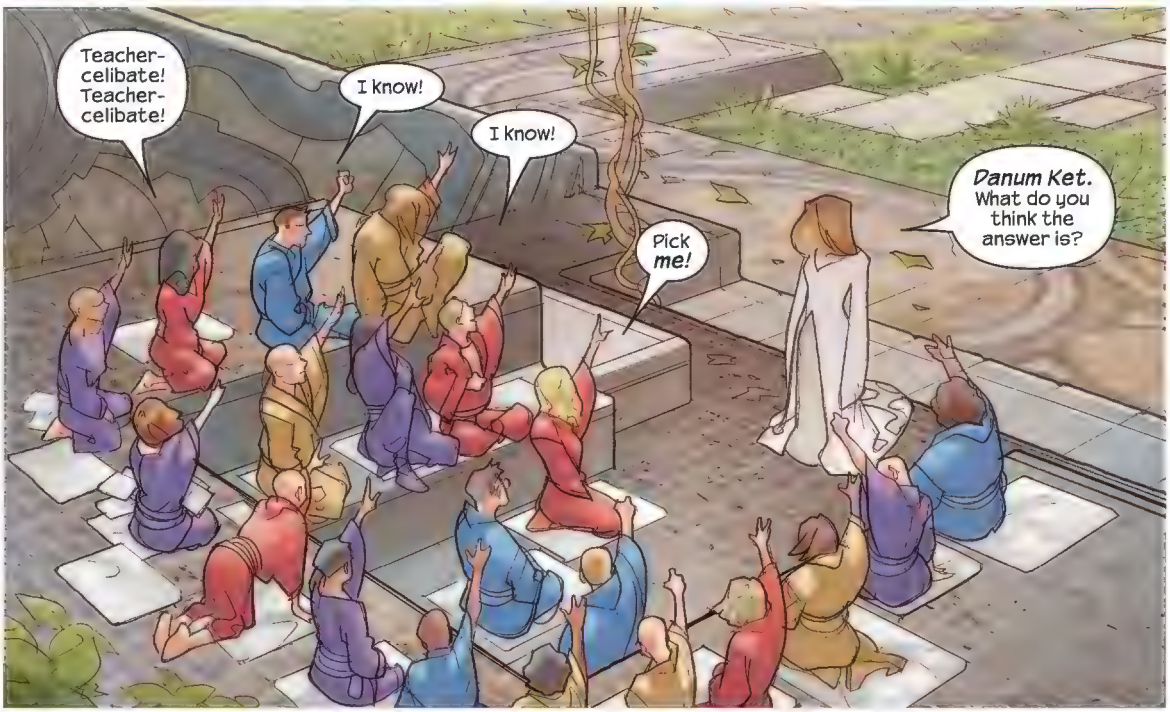
"...and come and see what Heaven is like..."
11:14

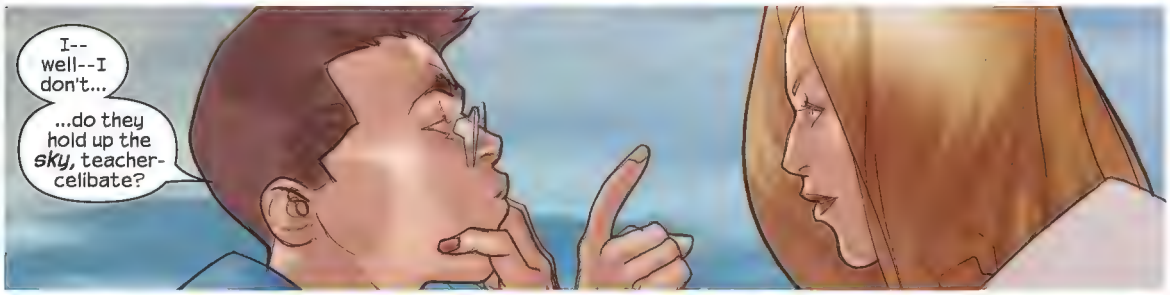
#45

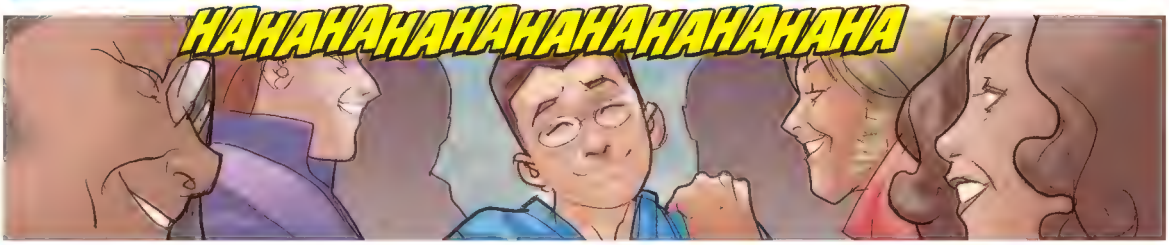
"Waking day is here!!!
"In Midian, we hang sun-globes in the trees on the Quincunx, and ribbons of mirrored silver to catch the light.
"It's the most beautiful thing in all the world.
"And we all bring offerings to Machine Hill. Not big things but things we love.
"Because the machines gave us our lives back after we lost them.
"The machines... and the king.
"Bless him a million times. And his servant Norrin Radd, the Silver Searcher, who brought us home."
I wonder sometimes what the expression on his face is. The one you never see anywhere else.
I wonder if he's feeling something that only a hero can feel.

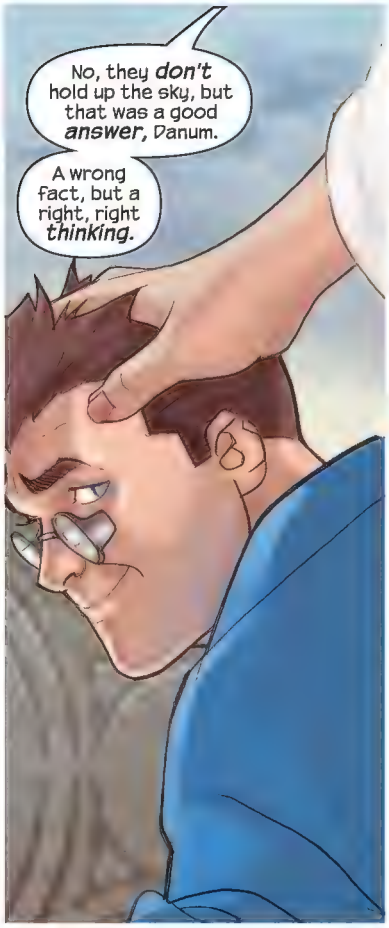
CLAP CLAP
CLAP CLAP CLAP
CLAP CLAP

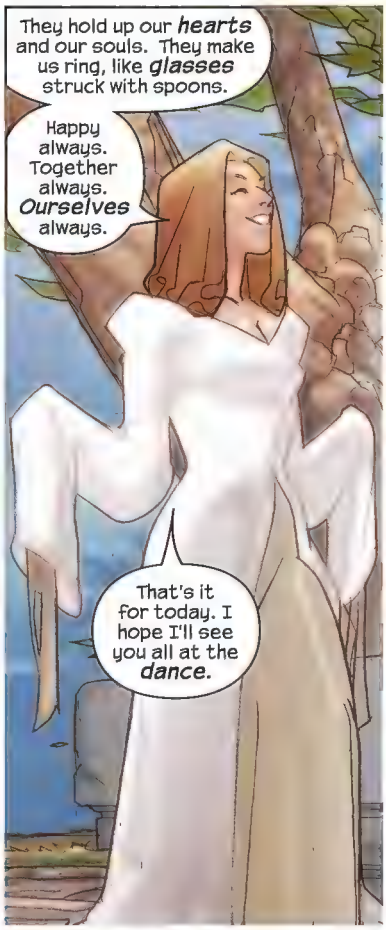

That's *excellent,* Ivri. Really lovely work.
Thank you, teacher-celibate.
But you forgot to say what the machines actually *do.* Who can tell me that?


Teacher-celibate! Teacher-celibate!
I know!
I know!
Pick *me!*
Danum Ket. What do you think the answer is?

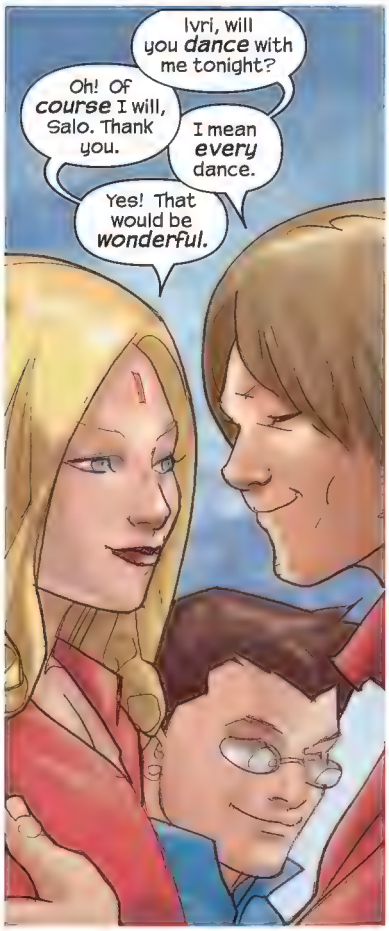

I-- well--I don't...
...do they hold up the *sky,* teacher-celibate?


HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA


No, they *don't* hold up the sky, but that was a good *answer,* Danum.
A wrong fact, but a right, right *thinking.*


They hold up our *hearts* and our souls. They make us ring, like *glasses* struck with spoons.
Happy always. Together always. *Ourselves* always.
That's it for today. I hope I'll see you all at the *dance.*

Danum Ket, you make me *laugh* with your wrong answers.
Thank you, Ivri. I'm very *stupid,* I know.
Umm ...I was wondering... at the *dance* tonight...would you--


Ivri, will you *dance* with me tonight?
Oh! Of *course* I will, Salo. Thank you.
I mean *every* dance.
Yes! That would be *wonderful.*

See you tonight, Danum Ket.
Yes...

...See you tonight, Ivri.

You *like* Ivri Sansou?
Oh yes, Teph. I like her a *lot.*
But she's *red* clan, Danum. We're *blue.* You're such a *fool.*
I know!

But to look at her makes me forget what I was *thinking* sometimes.
Although that also happens when I'm *not* looking at her. Mother says I've got nothing in my head but *clouds.*

Look. It's your *friend.*
Yes. Wait for me, Teph. I'll just be a minute.

Here, Stone Man. I brought some more *pebbles* for you.
I know you like these colors best--blue and white.
white

So who will you dance with tonight?
Everyone!
One after *another*?
No, all at the same time. The girls can *fight* to hold me!

SKRETCHHHHH

Sorry, Stone Man!
Sorry sorry sorry!

TO THE MEMORY OF
NORRIN RADD
THE SILVER SEARCHER
HE FOUND US AND HE BROUGHT
US HOME

Good even, boys.
Good even, mother.
Can we change into our *ceremonials* and go straight to the Quincunx?

We'll go *together*. As soon as your father gets back from making his *offering*.
We may be *ancients*, but we still love to dance.

Yeah. The *"creaky back"*.
How would you like your *nose* to belong to yellow clan, Teph?
Mom. This *painting*... what is it?

Oh, just a *dream* I had, Dan.
It stuck in my *mind* for some reason.

LATER THAT EVENING...
Friends all! Today we celebrate the *Waking,* when we rose from our deaths and found that *Heaven* looked very much like home.
Bless the *King,* and bless the Silver Searcher.
In everything you do or say or think this night, *celebrate* the gift they gave us.
Be alive, and *rejoice!*

Iv..
Iv...
Ivri.
Oh. Hello, Danum Ket.
Yes. Hello, Ivri.
Hello.
I want to...
...to dance.
I want to *dance* with you.
Thank you, Danum Ket.
Thank you so *much.*

But what color are you, silly boy?
The only red I see is in your face.
Danum Ket, you're just a crazy, crazy boy!
I have a head full of clouds!
We'll laugh so much when we tell this in class tomorrow. Now go and find someone blue to dance with!
Hello. What are you making there with those pebbles?
Four?

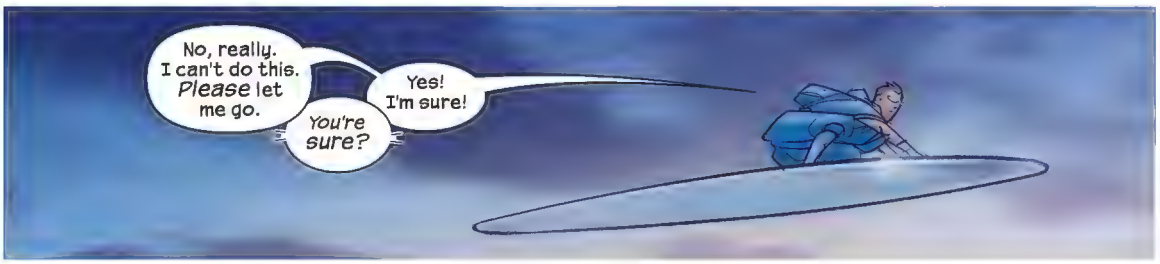
four
Four what?
what
I love a red girl, and you count to four.
You're my best friend, Stone Man. My very best friend.
We both have heads full of clouds.
And you're a hero, Searcher.
TO THE MEMORY OF
NORRIN RADD
THE SILVER SEARCHER
HE FOUND US AND HE
US HOME
And you are my king.
Bless you a million times.
I don't know.
I don't know.
I don't even know what it is that I don't know. That's how stupid I am.

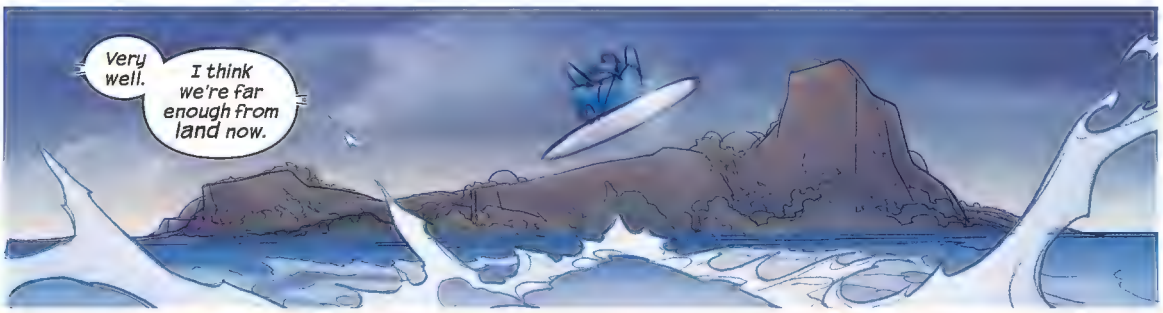
SHOOOOOOM
Come with me, Danum Ket...
...if you want Reed Richards to live.

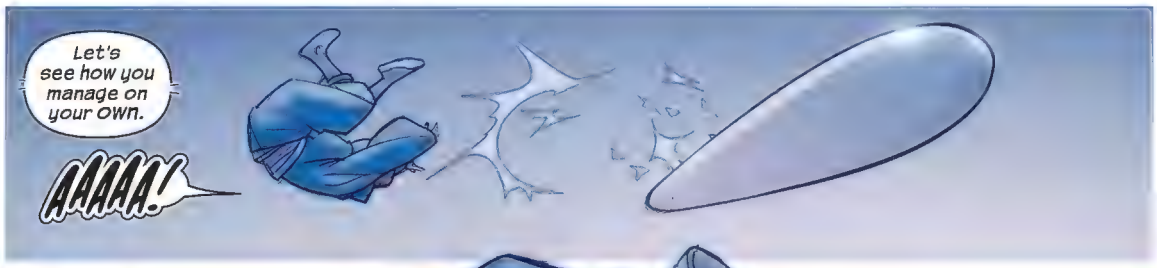
Wh--who is Reed Richards? And what are *you*?
You are Reed Richards.
And this object is a surfboard.
But I am not the board.
I am Norrin Radd.
The Searcher? You're the Silver Searcher?
Exactly. So trust me. Climb onto the board.
And find yourself again.
But--I don't know how to *do* this.
The board generates its own gravity field. You'll feel no momentum or acceleration.
Think of yourself as standing still--
--while the universe runs to meet you.

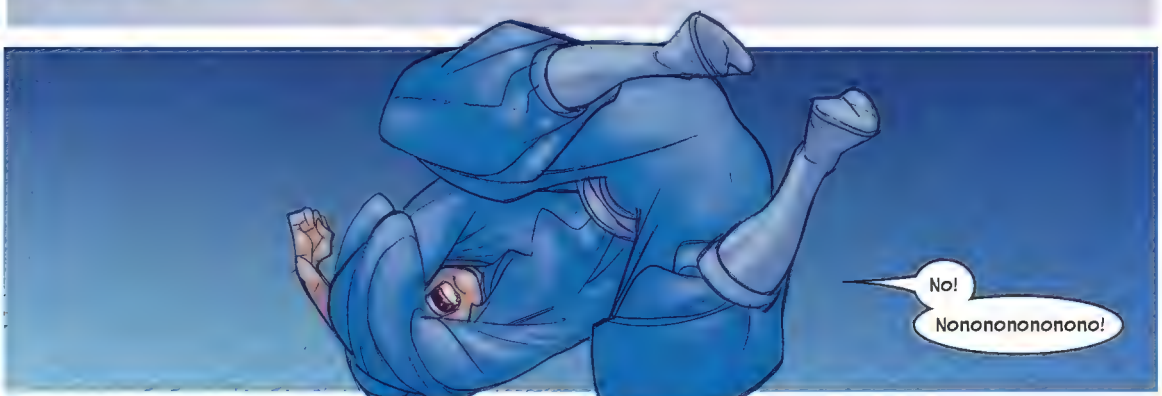
This--this makes my head spin. I want it to stop now.
Too late, Danum Ket.
Amazingly, you chose truth over happiness.
I intend to hold you to that choice.
SHOOOOOOOOM
Was that...?
My brother. I'm sorry.
I think he must have given the wrong answer again.

N-Norrin Radd, please let me go!
I'm not like you. I'm not searching for anything.
I don't think that's true, Danum Ket. Be brave for a little longer.


No, really. I can't do this. Please let me go.
Yes! I'm sure!
You're sure?


Very well.
I think we're far enough from land now.


Let's see how you manage on your own.
AAAAA!


No!
Nonononononono!

WHA--?!
WHOA!
UFF!

Huf
Huf
Huf
How do you feel?
I don't remember what it's *called*. But not--happy. Tell me.
Tell me *everything*.

The king-- Revka Temerlune-- is older than your entire civilization.
When the Subrogation Edict was passed, making him ruler of Zenn-La for the rest of his natural life, your ancestors were discovering fire.
Temerlune was the strongest telepath our world had ever produced. And the psycho-machines amplified his power a thousand thousandfold.
He laid the web of his thoughts across Zenn-La. Touched us all.
The machines--
They gave us endless, unwavering happiness.
A society where it was impossible to grieve. To be afraid, or ashamed, or lonely.
Except for the king, of course. He brooded in his great tower, alone, looking down always on the paradise he could never be part of.
Perhaps it drove him mad. Little wonder, if it did.
Why do I need to see this?
Because this is my confession, Reed Richards. The king chose a child to train up as his successor.
Adjusting the resonances of the boy's brain so that he'd be different from all his peers.
So that he'd be-- immune.

You.
Me. I grew up outside the cocoon, looking in at other people's shallow, perpetual joy.
It was hard. Eventually--unbearable.

And so I convinced myself that endless happiness was a tyranny. A curse.

I bided my time. Smiled in the king's face while I studied how best to betray him.

One day I drugged his wine, and while he slept I turned off the machines.
I thought there would be revolution. I thought the people would thank me, and make me king in his place.

But they couldn't bear to see the world as it was. They were like--addicts in sudden, terrible withdrawal.
They went mad. Killed themselves and each other, in their millions.

My God.

But you said this was--
Thousands of years ago. Yes. Temerlune had made himself immortal already, by surgical means.
Now he made me immortal too, as part of my punishment.
And he took away my immunity. Made me his slave.
Sent me out into the void, with hermetically sealed skin and a star-core for a heart.
To search forever, until I found another race to populate Zenn-La.
Earth. You found Earth.
Good. The memories are returning to you, now that I've brought you outside the machines' effective radius.
I paid for one sin with another just as big, Richards.
The minds of your people have been overwritten. They're playing back psychic recordings of lives long since ended.
Zenn-La's last generation, preserved in the machines' infallible memories--and now reborn.
Infallible?
We'll see.

And then one seed in each hole you've dug. With a little water, and a tablet of the seed-food.
Will there be *flowers?*
Huge flowers, my poppet. Flowers that will bring butterflies and featherheads and pollen-sippers.
Majesty, the machines register an *anomaly.*
Then *summarize* it. Don't waste my time.
A *psi-signature* has moved to the tracking limit and then *disappeared.*
It was one of the *four* that you told us to monitor with *particular* care.
Ah. A pity. A *great* pity. But I suppose it was a *long shot* at best.
All four of them were so *hard* to imprint. So different from the rest.
Shall we seek him *out?*

No. I believe he'll come to *you*. Make it quick.
And *painless...* if you can.

#46

TO THE MEMORY OF
NORRIN RADD
THE SILVER SEARCHER
HE FOUND US AND HE BROUGHT
US HOME
You're sure?
Oh, yeah. I'm sure.
Where else would you hide a man with silver-armored skin and a star-core for a heart?
Thank you, Reed Richards.
So the device worked, and you and your friends are all met once again?
You're no better at counting than your boss, "the king with no enemies," are you?

It worked fine on Sue and Johnny--and on you, just now.
Changed your neuronal valences so the Psycho-Man's machines can't control your minds any more.
But when I tried it on Ben--I got nothing.
It's like his mind isn't even in there. So I can't set him free.
So what do we do now?
We shut down the King's psi-network. All of it.
Somewhere there's a core machine that's putting out these signals--brainwashing everybody. We find it and we destroy it.
When I shut down the machines the first time, people died. The shock was too great.
But they'd been having their emotions programmed throughout their whole lives. This time around, we're talking about a few days or weeks.
Anyway, I don't think we have a choice. Unless doing nothing is a choice.
The core machine will be in Zenn-Hebet, the capital city. But don't underestimate the King, Reed Richards.
Whatever you may think about your own abilities, remember this...

"...Revka Temerlune--your *Psycho-Man*--may be the most dangerous enemy you've ever faced."

Here you are, Enid. Just as I *promised.*

Ripe *tomatoes* for lunch.

The *bees* are eating my flowers!

No, princess. They're only drinking the *nectar.*

If I shoo them away, will they *sting* me?

Nothing in this garden will hurt you, Enid.

And if anyone *else* makes you unhappy, the bees will see to it that he doesn't come *back* in a hurry.

I may have some *business* to attend to today. Could you bear it if I left you *alone* for a while?

Will you be back in time to read me my *story?*

Oh, yes. I promise.

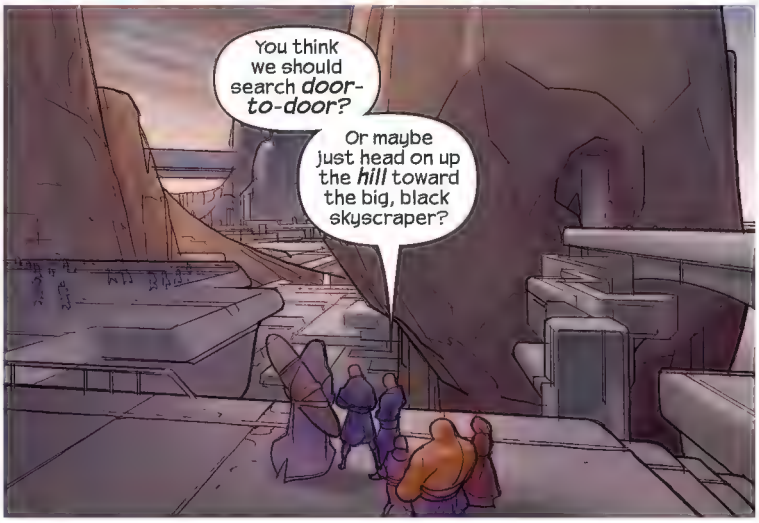
Two stories, to make up?

Two stories it is.

I thought capital cities were meant to have a *cosmopolitan* vibe.
Why is everyone *staring* at us?
My face is one that every *child* on Zenn-La knows, Johnny Storm. Even a *glimpse* of my silvery skin arouses excitement.
Your friend Ben is also somewhat out of the *ordinary*.

Fortunately, the *mind-web* keeps everyone happy and docile. This is the best-mannered mob I've ever seen.

I'm not reading any unusual *power* usage, though. We'll have to find the core machine some *other* way.

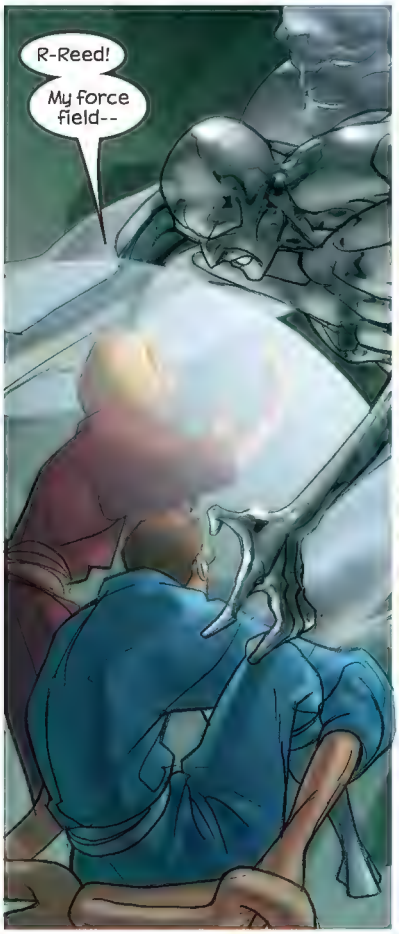

You think we should search *door-to-door?*
Or maybe just head on up the *hill* toward the big, black skyscraper?

BRATOOOM
Wow. There's kind of an echo in here, isn't there?
Which machine is sending out the psi-signals, Reed?
It--can't be any of them. They're switched off. Mothballed.
And covered in dust. That doesn't make any sense, unless--

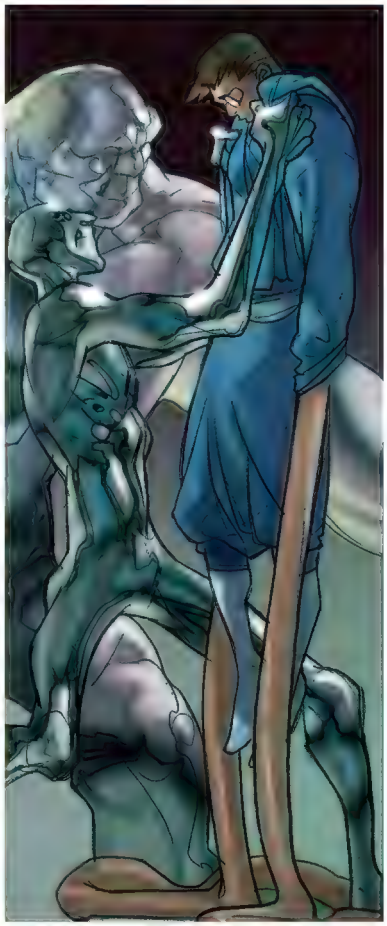
We just walked into a trap, didn't we?
Yeah.
Like village idiots.
Yeah.
That burns me up.
Two. Three. Take the Earth children.
Norrin Radd belongs to me. To Regent!

Man, did you have an accident with a *fruit peeler?*
'Cause you look like a--
H-hey!
Help--
THOOM
THOOM
THOOM
Comfortable in there, flame-being? I ask for purposes of irony, only.

You should have stayed on your pedestal, Norrin Radd.
As a story-book hero, whose tale at least had a happy ending.
Whereas now, your story will be a tragedy--
--in three acts.
TZAKKKKKKKK

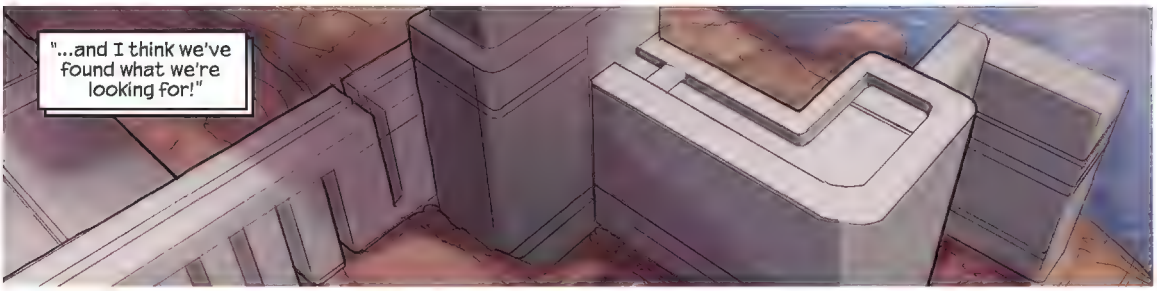

R-Reed!
My force field--

GKKK!



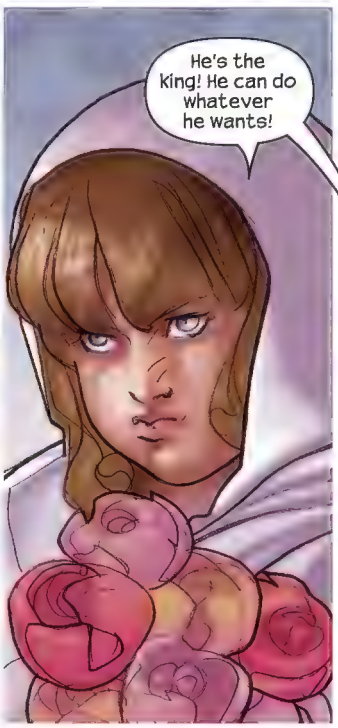
KRAKOOOWWW

Okay, let's see how you like *this.*
TEK TEK TEK
VEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE
That's-- the zapper. The thing you used to *deprogram* us.
Yeah. Same principle *here.*
I'm sending on *their* frequency. Making it hard for them to *think.*
You *in* there, Ben?
Ben
Right
No? Well, thanks for the *assist,* anyway. Hold on a little longer. We're gonna put this *right.*
There *is* a power feed here. Very faint.
It links this place to *another* location, very close by...


"...and I think we've found what we're looking for!"

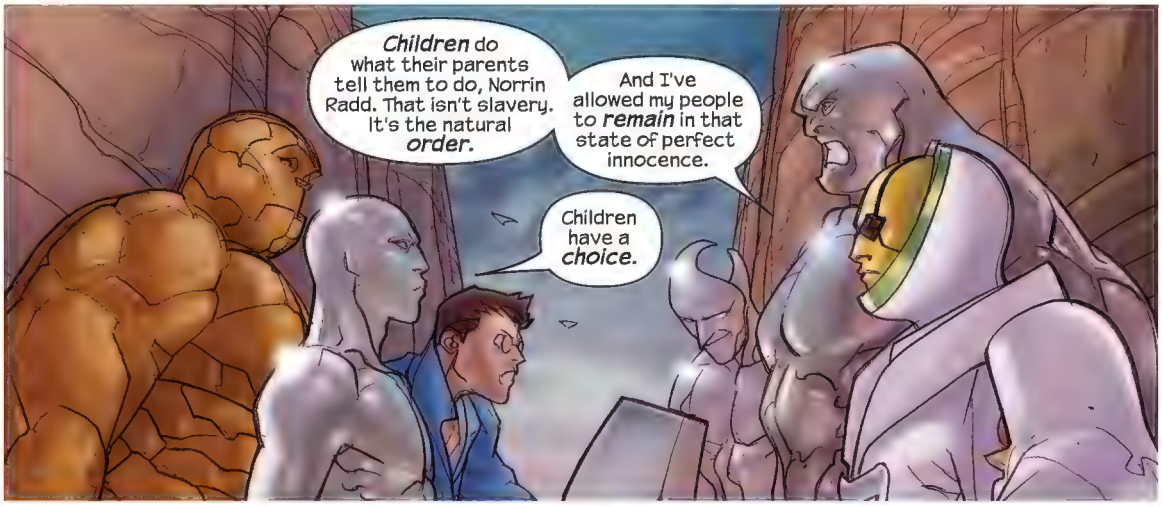
Enid, go and tidy your *room.*
No. Don't *make* me.
I want to stay with *you.*

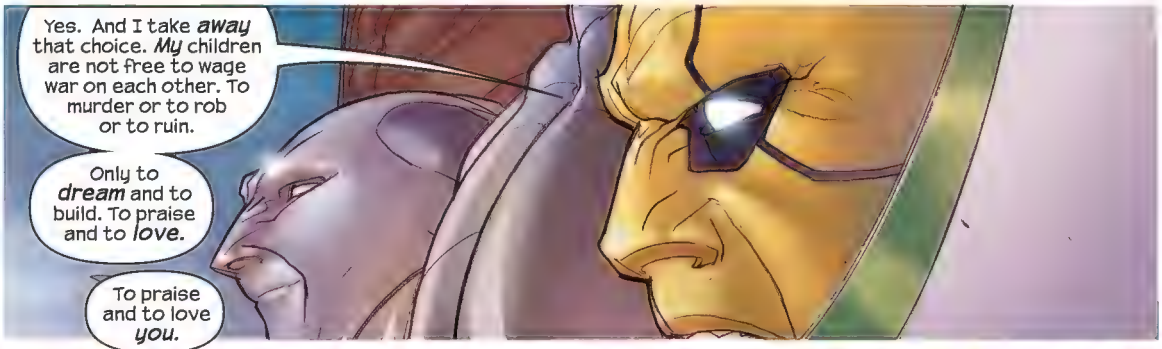
Did you honestly think you could *do* this?
Kidnap six billion people? *Destroy* Ben's mind? Steal my *sister?*
I think this is a battle you can't *win,* boy. Best not to start it.


He's the king! He can do whatever he wants!

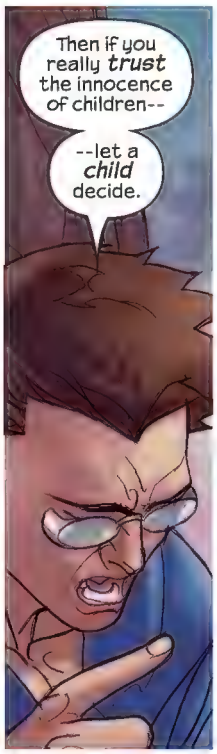
See?
TCHOOOOM

Flame on!
Wha--?
I *said,* flame on!
Flame on!!!
You think because everything here is so *simple,* we have no advanced science?
I made the *Silver Searcher* what he is. I built the psi-web. I have technologies here that can juggle *worlds* like colored balls.
And *lives,* my king? Do you juggle them, too?
You!
You *dare* to speak to me!
I dare. Look around you, Revka Temerlune. See what you've *made,* and call it what it is.
A world full of happy *slaves.*

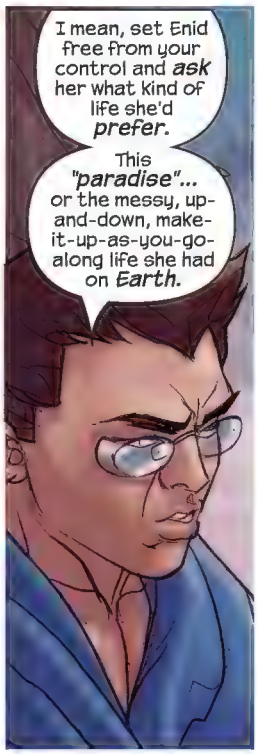

Children do what their parents tell them to do, Norrin Radd. That isn't slavery. It's the natural order.
And I've allowed my people to remain in that state of perfect innocence.
Children have a choice.

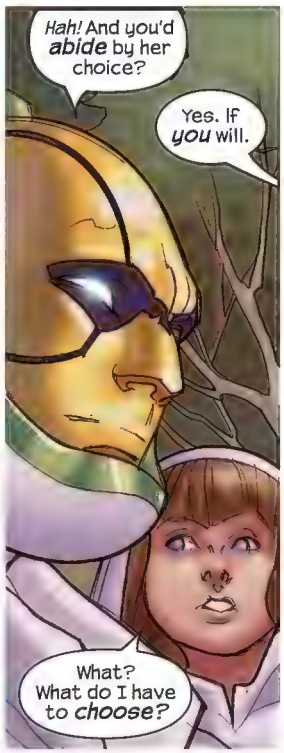

Yes. And I take away that choice. My children are not free to wage war on each other. To murder or to rob or to ruin.
Only to dream and to build. To praise and to love.
To praise and to love you.

You see how I live. I don't want their worship, Norrin Radd.
My edict is "be happy." Because happy people have no need to hurt. They can be children forever.

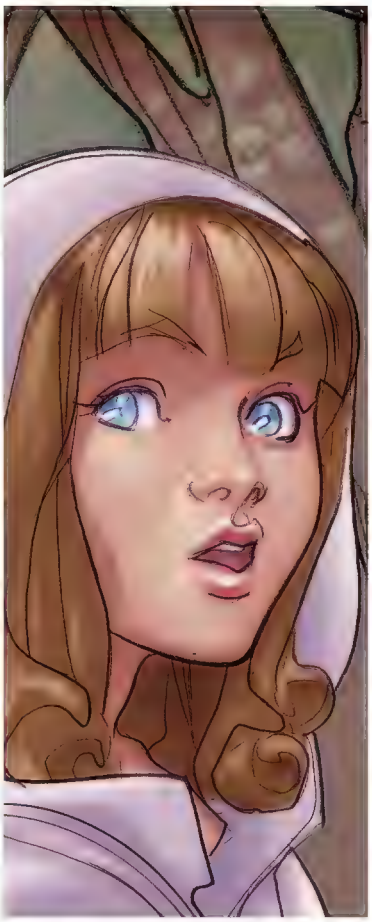

Then if you really trust the innocence of children--
--let a child decide.

Shall I silence him, Majesty?
Not yet, Regent. What do you mean, boy?
There's no decision to be made here.


I mean, set Enid free from your control and ask her what kind of life she'd prefer.
This "paradise"... or the messy, up-and-down, make-it-up-as-you-go-along life she had on Earth.


Hah! And you'd abide by her choice?
Yes. If you will.
What? What do I have to choose?

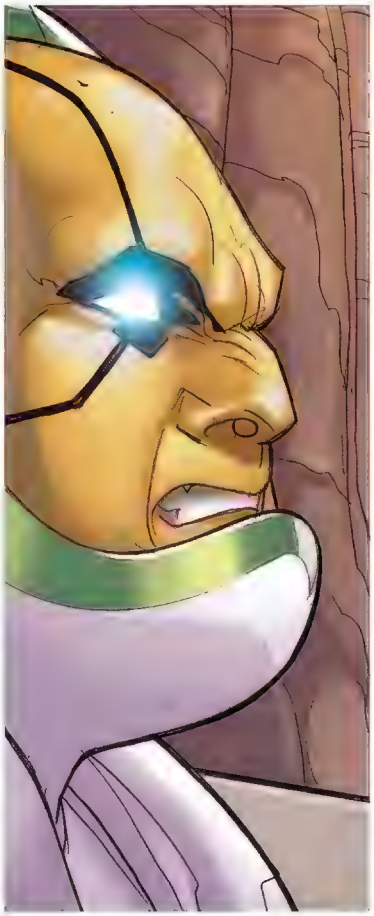
I care deeply for Enid. That's why I kept her with me.
You've made a mistake, Reed Richards. There's no slavery here--only affection.
Don't tell me. Show me.
I intend to.
...
Come, Enid.
We'll have those stories now, shall we?



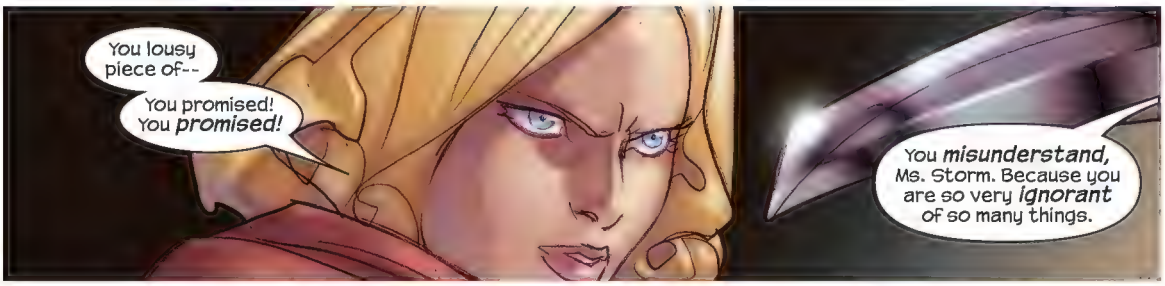
REEEEEEEED!

Take me home.Take me *home!*
I-I will, Enid.
I will, I *promise.*

We can't *hold* you to your word, King Temerlune. Do what you will.
But do it *knowing* what you do.



So be it.
AHHRRR!


You lousy piece of--
You promised! You promised!
You misunderstand, Ms. Storm. Because you are so very ignorant of so many things.

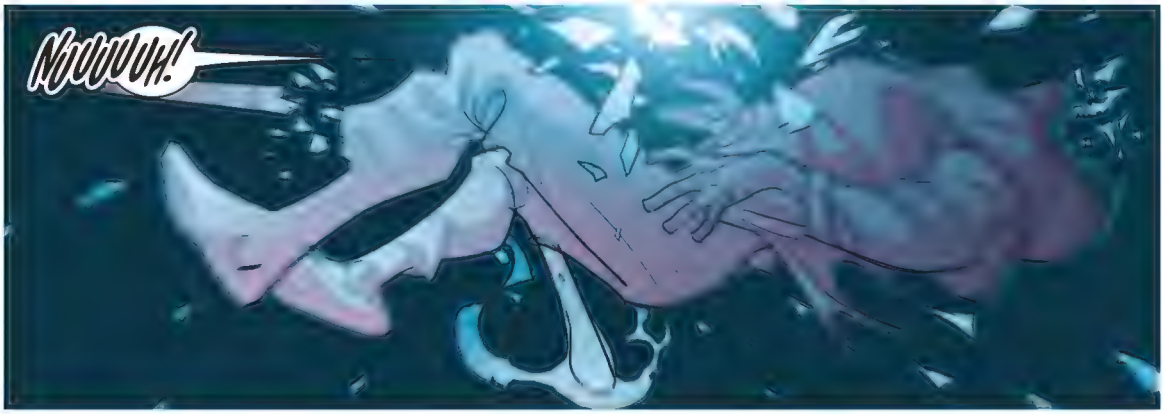
There is no core psi-machine. There's only me. My mind, directly controlling the psi-web--and all the technologies of Zenn-La.
But I've just patched Reed Richards' mind into the circuit.
Let him take control of the system, if he can. All the memories I stole are still there.

Let him feel what it's like to balance six billion minds within his own--
--and try to stay sane.

Oh, God, he's going to *die!* Norrin Radd, what can we do?
His mind needs an *anchor.* Otherwise it will disintegrate.
But I do not know of any mind besides the *king's* that could take so great a weight.

AAAAHRR! GUUUUUH!
A mind-web of your own. Very ingenious. But also, alas--very *fragile.*
Let him bear this burden as I have borne it. *Alone!*

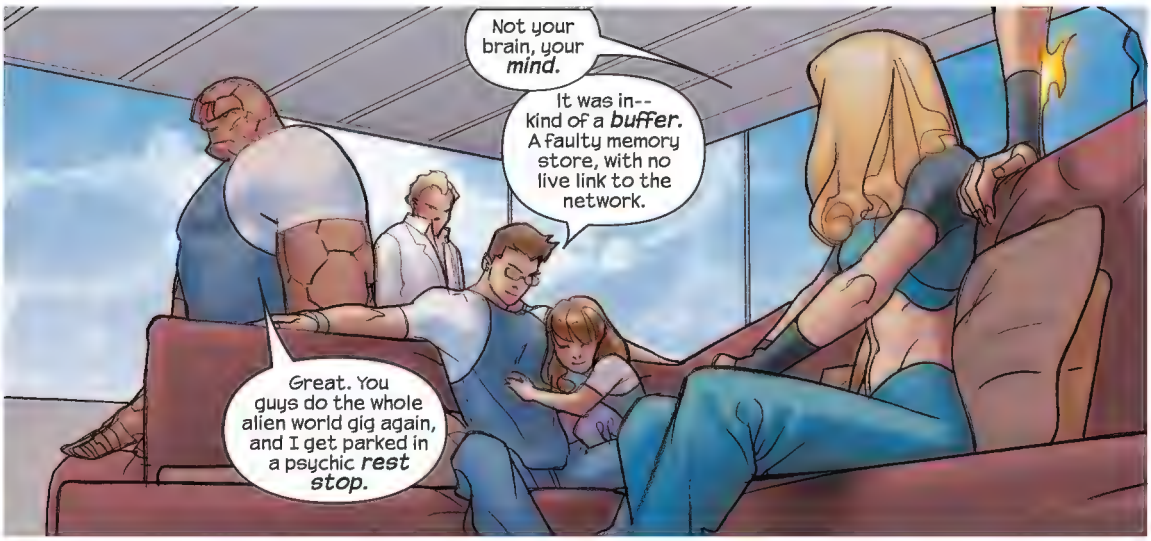
Actually--
--we prefer to stick together.

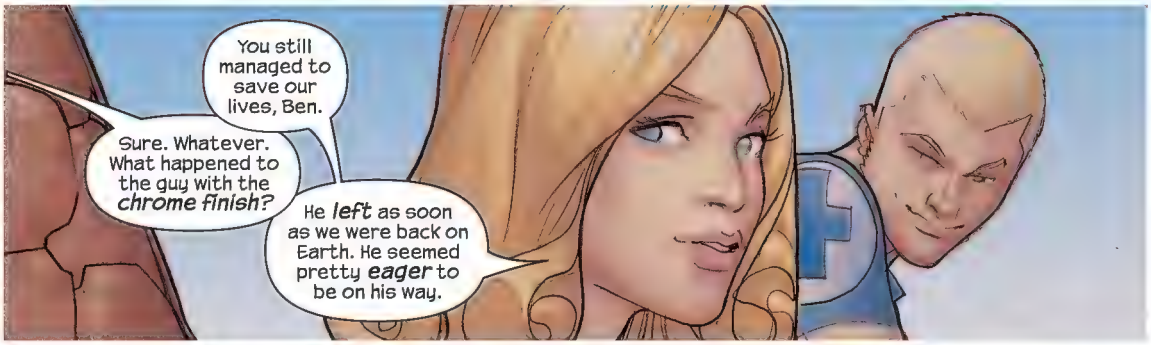

NUUUUH!

You struck the *king,* and you will die!
Stand down, Regent. If you try to use the *power cosmic* on me, there'll be nothing left of your *arm.*

I think I'm getting the *hang* of this now. *All* the technologies, he said.
Let's give it a *try.*

ONE HOUR LATER...
Wait a minute, wait a minute.
You found my brain *where?*


Not your brain, your mind.
It was in--kind of a buffer. A faulty memory store, with no live link to the network.
Great. You guys do the whole alien world gig again, and I get parked in a psychic rest stop.


You still managed to save our lives, Ben.
Sure. Whatever. What happened to the guy with the chrome finish?
He left as soon as we were back on Earth. He seemed pretty eager to be on his way.

But you don't have anything to search for anymore.
Perhaps it's just that the habit is ingrained now, Reed Richards.
I need to be out there again--in the void. In the big black.

And nobody else remembers any of this. We did some editing.
Smoothed over the edges--the births and deaths and discontinuities--so it all made sense.

So that just leaves the king.
The king?
The Psycho-Man, then. Isn't he going to try again?

No. He's not a threat to us anymore...

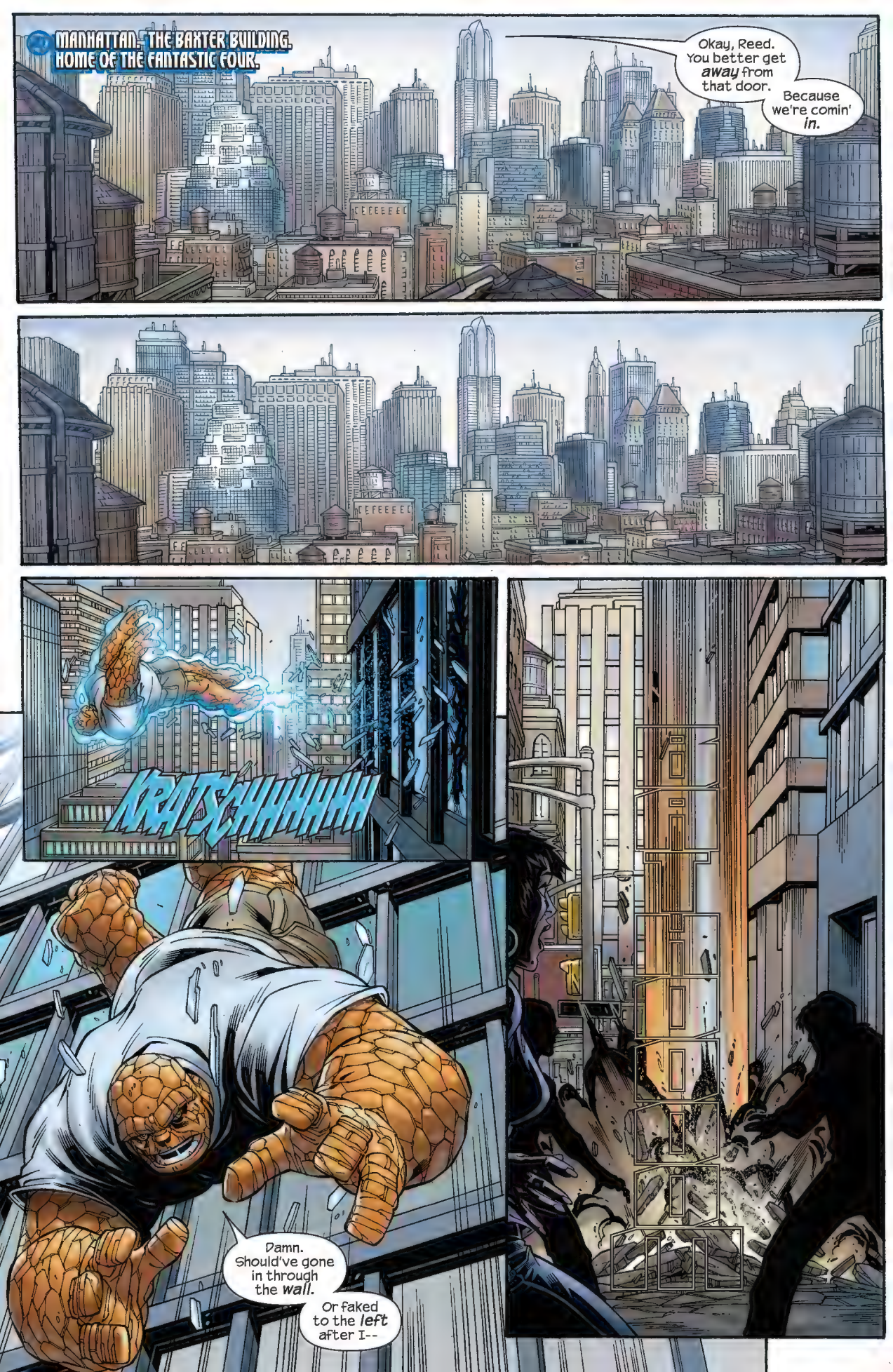
"...In fact...
"...he's very happy with the way things came out."
There! Look! I dug a big hole. In the ground.
For the seeds. Have we got any seeds?
If we plant seeds, there'll be flowers. Or tomatoes. Or maybe mice.
I will find some seeds, majesty.
And you're a gold man. A bright, shiny, gold man.
There were blue and red and yellow and green--lots of colors! But I never saw a gold man before.
"I think there might have been a silver one once...
"...but I can't remember his name."

#47

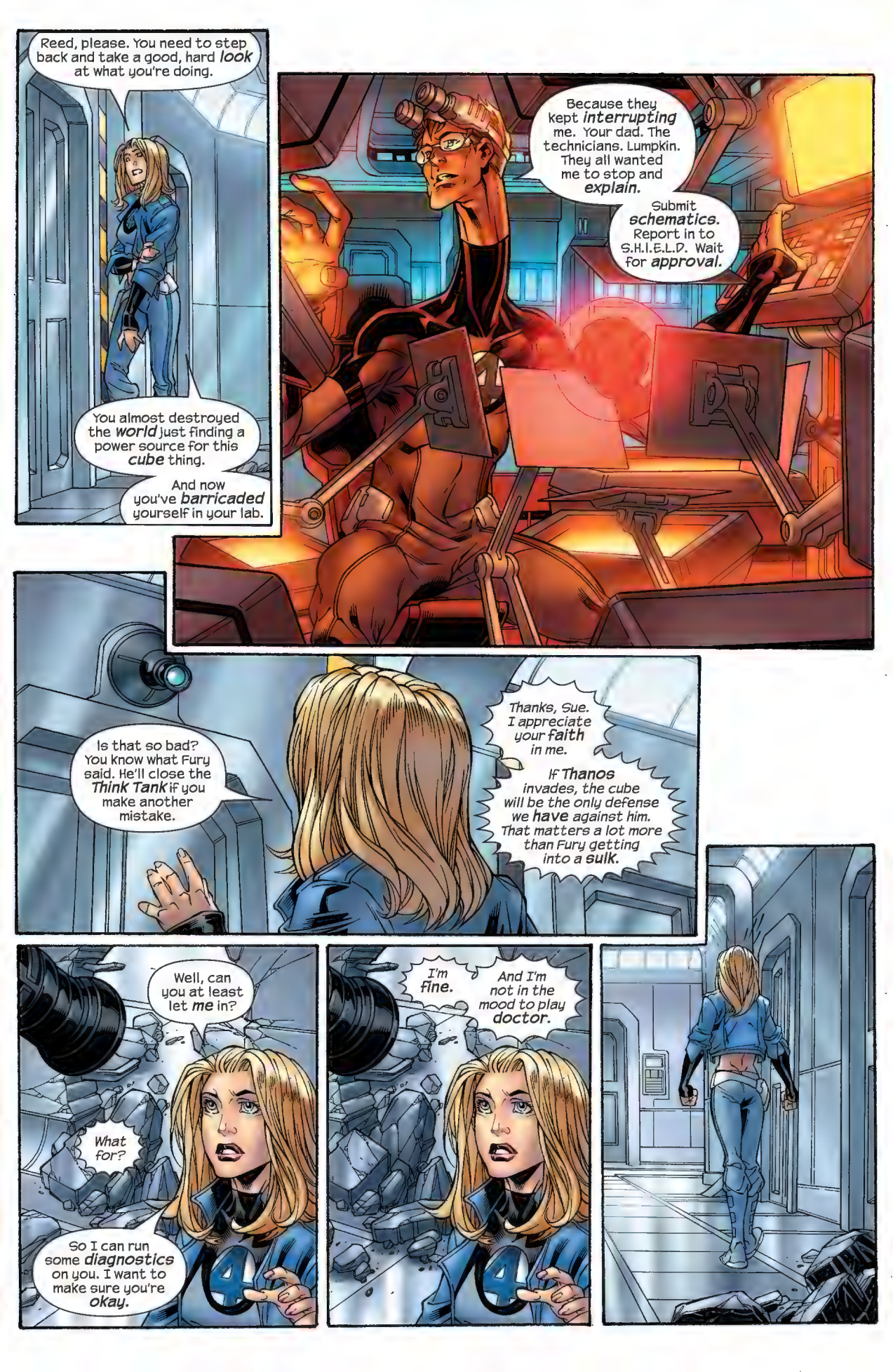
Misha. Pick up the largest pair of weights. The ones marked with a circle.
Then follow the red line out of the maze. Your time starts now.
MROAHRR-RRRRRRRR
Do as you're told, Misha, or you'll be disciplined.
Don't make me hurt you.
RRRRRR-RRRRRRR
That's right. That's right.
Excellent. Now follow the red line out of the--

KRESCHHHH
Oh dear. I warned you, Misha.
I warned you.
MMMMMMISHA NOT CARE!
MISHA HATE DOCTORRRRRRR!
IS BAD BAD BAD BAD DOCTORRRRRRR!
Yes, very eloquent. You're a credit to your species.
And I suppose you've gotten used to the shock harness by now.
So let's try something a little different.

MROAHRRRRRRR!!!
TSCHRAKKKK
Pick up the weights.
And follow the red line out of the maze.
MMMMMMMERCY, DOCTORRR.
NO HURRRRT. NO HURRRRT MISHA!
Mercy?
Did you say mercy?
Who's been teaching you these words?
TSCHRAKKKKK

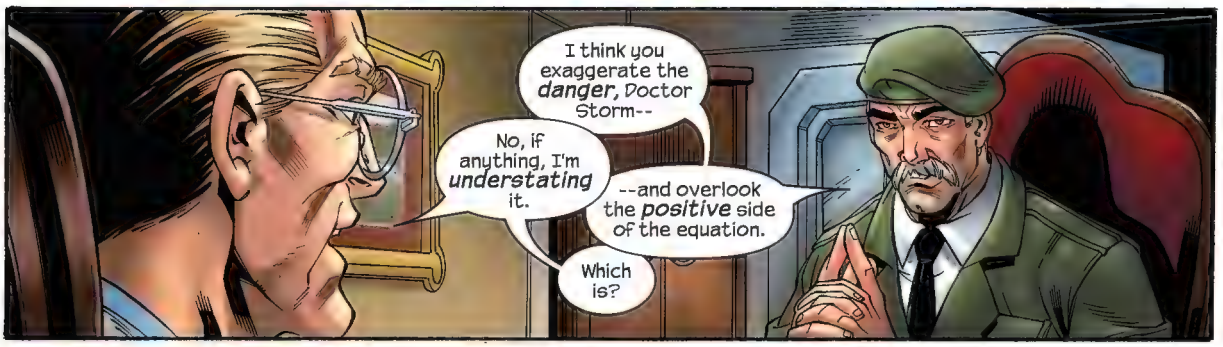

MANHATTAN. THE BAXTER BUILDING. HOME OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR.
Okay, Reed. You better get away from that door.
Because we're comin' in.
KRATSCHHHHHH
Damn. Should've gone in through the wall.
Or faked to the left after I--

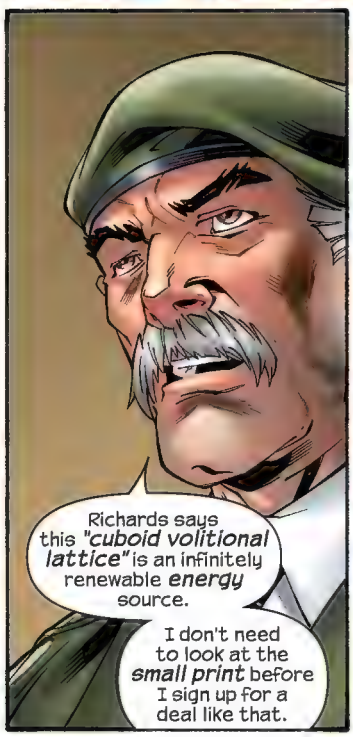
Nothin' to *see* here, guys. Keep walkin'.
Anyone takes a *picture* of me lookin' like this, they're gonna be *eatin'* the camera.
Ben, he booby-trapped the door!
Oh wow, Johnny, are you sure?
I thought maybe I tripped over the *mat* or somethin'.
Seriously. This is getting way, *way* out of hand. You could have *landed* on someone.
Yeah. Or broken a *nail*.
Maybe you should think about calling in the *big* guns.
I already *did*.
But he's not talking to *her*, either.


Reed, please. You need to step back and take a good, hard look at what you're doing.
You almost destroyed the world just finding a power source for this cube thing.
And now you've barricaded yourself in your lab.
Because they kept interrupting me. Your dad. The technicians. Lumpkin. They all wanted me to stop and explain.
Submit schematics. Report in to S.H.I.E.L.D. Wait for approval.
Is that so bad? You know what Fury said. He'll close the Think Tank if you make another mistake.
Thanks, Sue. I appreciate your faith in me.
If Thanos invades, the cube will be the only defense we have against him. That matters a lot more than Fury getting into a sulk.
Well, can you at least let me in?
What for?
So I can run some diagnostics on you. I want to make sure you're okay.
I'm fine.
And I'm not in the mood to play doctor.

Well, frankly, I'm seeing it as a crisis for *all* of us, General.
And I'm at a *loss* to understand how you can be so *laid-back* about it.
THE OFFICE OF DR. FRANKLIN STORM.

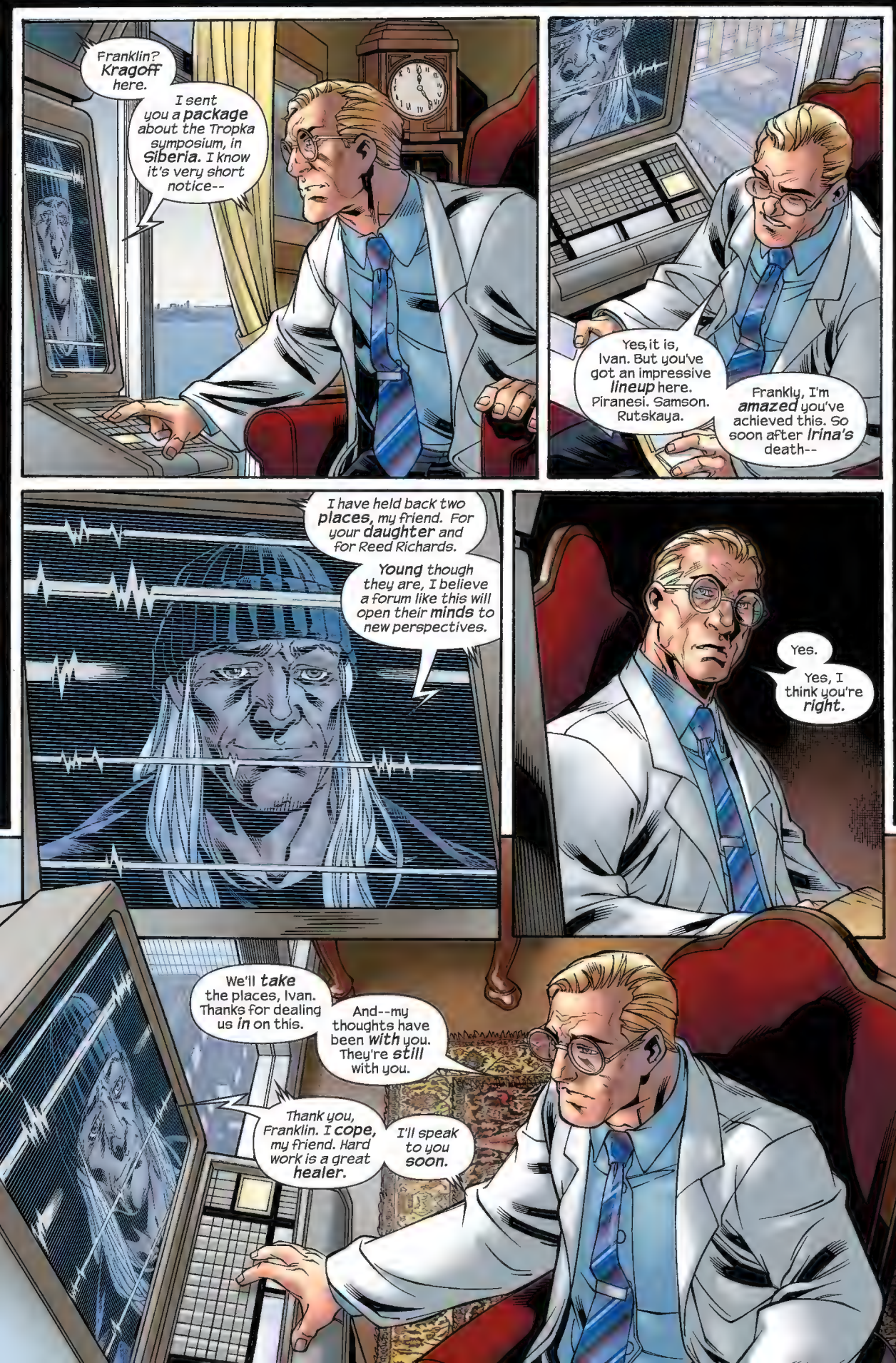
Reed is a genius. Potentially the greatest mind of our age.
If he starts to *obsess* over a problem -- as he has on this cosmic *cube* of his--his health is only one of *many* things that are on the line.


I think you exaggerate the *danger,* Doctor Storm--
No, if anything, I'm *understating* it.
--and overlook the *positive* side of the equation.
Which is?


Richards says this *"cuboid volitional lattice"* is an infinitely renewable *energy* source.
I don't need to look at the *small print* before I sign up for a deal like that.

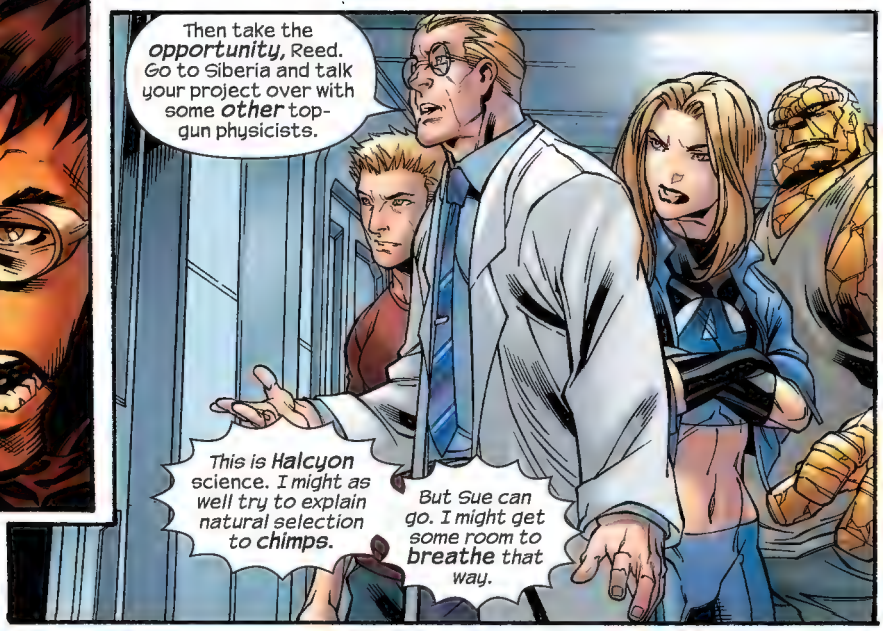
The small print is *exactly* what you should be looking at, General.
Why? Richards has done his own *risk* assessments. He assures me that everything is under *control.*
Reed is just a *boy.* He's far from seeing *clearly* on this, and he needs--
BEEDLY BEEDLY BEEP

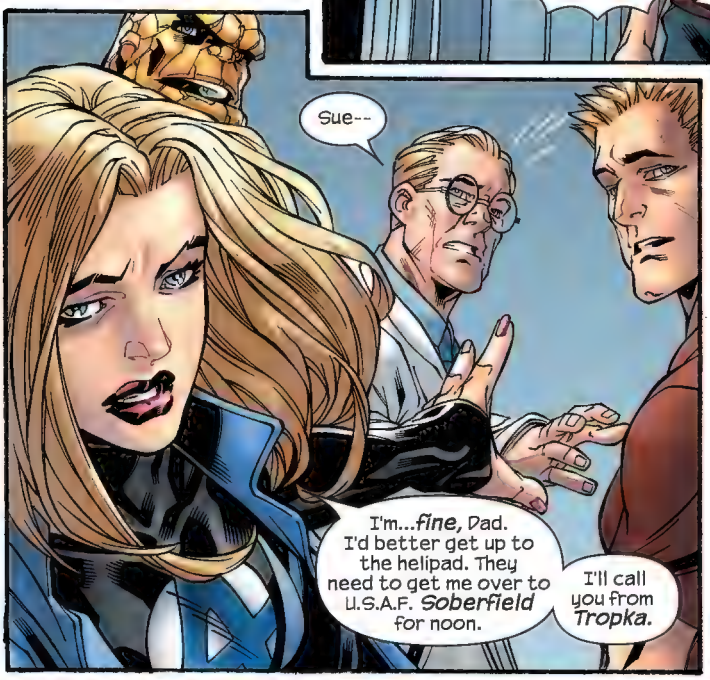
Take the *call,* Doctor.
We'll talk *later.*


Franklin? Kragoff here.
I sent you a package about the Tropka symposium, in Siberia. I know it's very short notice--
Yes, it is, Ivan. But you've got an impressive lineup here. Piranesi. Samson. Rutskaya.
Frankly, I'm amazed you've achieved this. So soon after Irina's death--
I have held back two places, my friend. For your daughter and for Reed Richards.
Young though they are, I believe a forum like this will open their minds to new perspectives.
Yes.
Yes, I think you're right.
We'll take the places, Ivan. Thanks for dealing us in on this.
And--my thoughts have been with you. They're still with you.
Thank you, Franklin. I cope, my friend. Hard work is a great healer.
I'll speak to you soon.

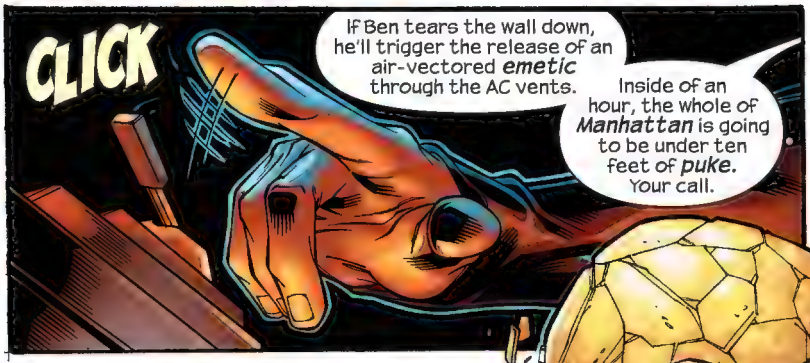
Оно случается. Оно реально случается.
Yes, Sorba. It's happening.
Speak English now, please. I need the practice.
I hope it will work, Doctor Kragoff. You've suffered so much.
But this may be the end of all your suffering. I pray for you.
Prayer? That's...bizarre, but thank you.
Not too long ago, prayer was one of the things that would get you sent to this terrible peninsula.
Times change. And we change with them.
Brain and spine will do, to start with. After that--
--we'll just have to see how we go.

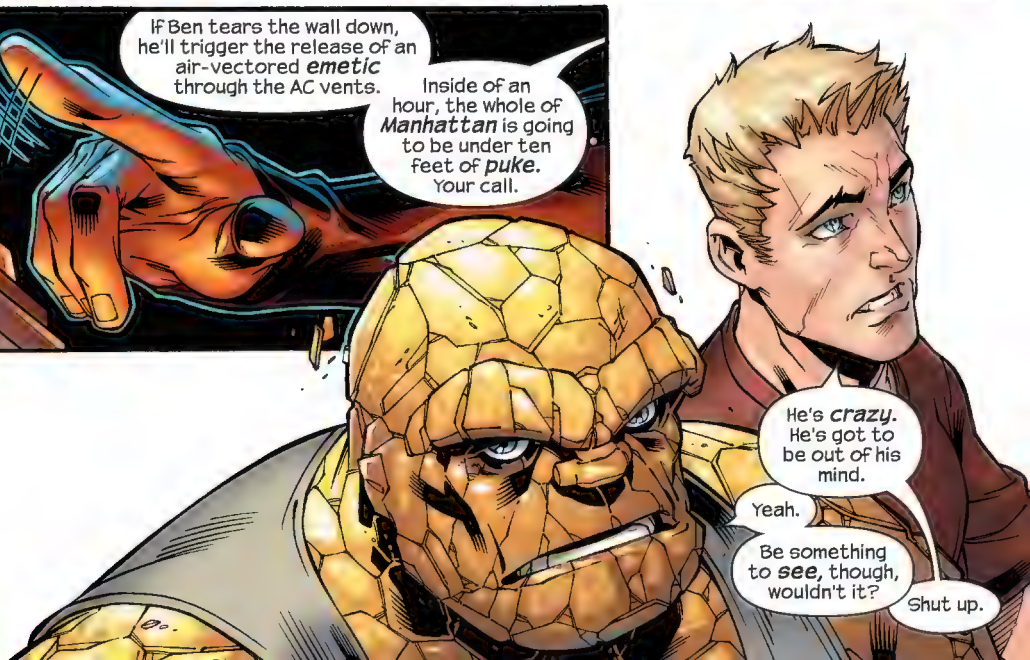
Forget it, Doctor Storm. I'm not coming out.
There's an idea in my mind, and it wants to be born. I have to finish this.


Then take the opportunity, Reed. Go to Siberia and talk your project over with some other top-gun physicists.
This is Halcyon science. I might as well try to explain natural selection to chimps.
But Sue can go. I might get some room to breathe that way.


Sue--
I'm...fine, Dad. I'd better get up to the helipad. They need to get me over to U.S.A.F. Soberfield for noon.
I'll call you from Tropka.

You're a real jerk, Richards, you know that?
I'm turning off the sound link.
In that case, I'm gonna tear the wall down.


CLICK
If Ben tears the wall down, he'll trigger the release of an air-vectored emetic through the AC vents.
Inside of an hour, the whole of Manhattan is going to be under ten feet of puke. Your call.


He's crazy. He's got to be out of his mind.
Yeah.
Be something to see, though, wouldn't it?
Shut up.

SIBERIA.
THE SHORE OF THE OKHOTSK SEA.

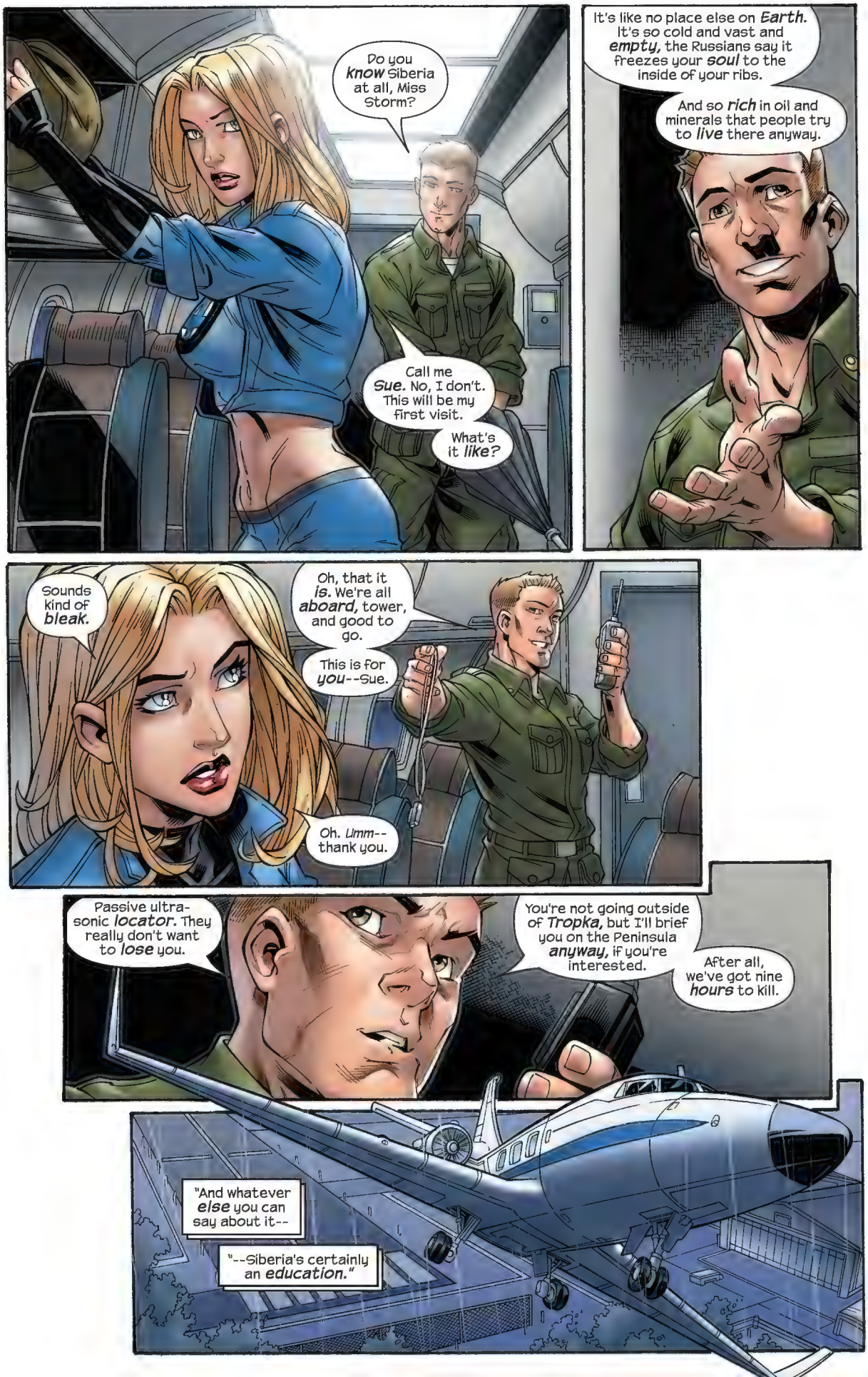
<Ohh, Stalin is my uncle, he's brave and strong and tall. But vodka is my mistress, and I love her best of all.>
<Daddy is home, Laika! And look what he's brought for you!>

<Food and fur and tallow, all in one sweet little bundle.>
<You want a hoof to chew on, yes? Well, today is a party. You'll have-->

BIPBIP
BIPBIP
BIPBIP
BIPBIP
BIPBIP

<H-hello?>
<Who's there?>
BIP BIP
BIP
CLICK
здесь москва. <Moscow here.>
<What do you mean, "hello"? Answer with your call sign and security code!>
Я огорченн!
<This is Major Valentin Shatalov. Call sign ochre castle. Code E kratkoyeh nine.>
<It's good to speak with you again, Major. This is indigo twelve two. We weren't even sure if you were still alive out there.>
<This activation message follows emergency protocol Dazhdbog.>
<"Tomorrow's sunrise will be red.">
мой бог!
<We need you in armor, comrade.>

U.S.A.F. SOBERFIELD.
CONNECTICUT.
Miss Storm! Over here!
We were starting to get worried.
Lieutenant Paul Lytton. I've been assigned to you as an aide for the duration of the trip.
Lieutenant.
Why do I need an aide?
I think the army sees you as a non-renewable resource, Miss Storm.
I also speak Russian, Czech and Serbian, so hopefully I'll be of use to you during the symposium itself.
Your plane is this way.
It's not very big, is it?
No, but it is fast. We fly over the Pole, bear east and touch down at Petropavlovsk inside of nine hours.
Just ahead of one big, bad mother of a snowstorm, apparently.


Do you *know* Siberia at all, Miss Storm?
Call me *Sue.* No, I don't. This will be my first visit.
What's it *like?*
It's like no place else on *Earth.* It's so cold and vast and *empty,* the Russians say it freezes your *soul* to the inside of your ribs.
And so *rich* in oil and minerals that people try to *live* there anyway.
Sounds kind of *bleak.*
Oh, that it *is.* We're all *aboard,* tower, and good to go.
This is for *you*--Sue.
Oh. *Umm*--thank you.
Passive ultra-sonic *locator.* They really don't want to *lose* you.
You're not going outside of *Tropka,* but I'll brief you on the Peninsula *anyway,* if you're interested.
After all, we've got nine *hours* to kill.
"And whatever *else* you can say about it--
"--Siberia's certainly an *education.*"

REED'S LABORATORY
Thank you, child. You've been-- invaluable.

"So yeah, to be honest--
"--it's a bit of a shock to the system."
In the old U.S.S.R. days, the whole of Siberia was held together by subsidized air transport.
The distances were too huge for any other way of getting around to be feasible.
But now?
The money isn't there anymore. The economy is imploding. Out in the sticks you'll see a lot of desperate people who are too poor to buy a ticket out.
And in the city they turn up the TV so they won't hear the storm coming.
Speaking of which--
--I thought we were meant to be trying to outrun this.
I guess it came on a little faster than we expected.
"But we should be fine.
"Takes more than a little snow to bring a Beech 400 down."

YOW
Sweet God! We're hit!
Something hit us! Miss Storm, strap yourself in. We're going to--

BANG

девушка. должна. жить.
<You have your orders.>
All right.
All right.
S-soon have you *out* of this, Sue. Leave it to *me*.
BLAM BLAM BLAM
SHKOWWWWWWW

No, that's not--that's not possible.
What are you telling me?
Then find it again, you idiot!
This is my daughter you're talking about!
Dad, what's the matter?
My God, you look like--like someone died or--
That was Soberfield ATC.
Johnny, they've lost contact with Sue's plane. There was a storm.
They think it may have gone down. Over land.
Then we'll go find her.
There are--this is in Russian airspace. We can't--
Johnny, they'll shoot you out of the sky.
No.
They won't.

The Seven-Ten-Split is radar-invisible.
They won't see us coming in, and they won't see us leaving.
You! This is your fault!
Johnny--
No! It's the truth! Sue only left here to get away from him!
I've been-- sick. Crazy. I don't know how, or why.
But I'm okay now. And if Sue's hurt, then I have to go to her.
If she's hurt, I'll burn a hole through you until I can see daylight.
Fine.
You do that, Johnny.
Meanwhile, we're wasting time talking when we should be in the air.
If we go sub-orbital we can be in Siberia inside of two hours.
In two hours, Sue could be dead.
You think I don't know that?

"But this is the middle of *nowhere.*
"I can't imagine anyone *else* getting to her before we do."

#48

Reed, we should be lower--closer to the ground.
No, we shouldn't, Johnny. I'm scanning for residual heat signatures.
Even after seven hours, the plane's engines ought to be hotter than the surrounding--
There!
SIBERIA
We have to get in and out fast--without being seen.
You think that's gonna be a problem?
I can't even see you from here.
This bulkhead was sheared off clean.
The plane didn't just ice up--someone shot it down.
What about this guy?
He's dead, Ben. Even before he froze. But he managed to finish his message.
What is it? His favorite radio station?
I think it's an ultrasound frequency.

I don't *care* what it is. Sue could be *dying* out here.
Flying *blind* isn't going to get us anywhere, Johnny.
She's not here with the *wreckage,* so we need to--
Tell me about it *later,* Reed. Talking's your best *event,* isn't it?
Just remember-- if she's *hurt,* we won't be settling this with a *conversation.*
два...
один...
Huh?
Okay, we've met the *enemy,* and he shoots like a--
SHAAA

WHOOM
UFFF!
Вы откуда?
Пойдемте со мной!

And that's where we stand, Ivan. Obviously, nobody must know that the Fantastic Four are on Russian soil.
But we couldn't just sit by while my daughter--when she could be--
Please calm yourself, my friend. You can rely on my discretion.
And we've sent our own search parties out from Tropka. Experienced men who know the area.
If anything can be done to find Susan and bring her to safety, you know we'll do it.
Thank you, Ivan.
It is nothing, Franklin. My thoughts are with you.
CLICK
How is she?
Ready, Doctor Kragoff. And the match is even closer than you hoped. The summary is here.
Thank you. But I'll see for myself.
I can't tell you how grateful I am for your help and support in this, Rutskaya.
It's been my privilege, Doctor Kragoff.
I've learned so much working beside you.

PLEASE, DOCTORRRRR.
IS MERCIFUL DOCTORRRRRRR!
EE EE EEEEEEEEEEE!
How much does she *remember?*
Almost nothing. The effect of the *drug* is like alcohol poisoning.
She's sick and disoriented and out of touch with *reality.*
Perfect. Then we'd best make a *start.* To snuff out such a young life is a *terrible* thing.
The sooner it's *done,* the better.

Давай поиграем!
Man, I feel like I died and came back on a Saturday morning cartoon show!
He's the original *Crimson Dynamo*. A sort of--Eastern Bloc version of Iron Man. I hacked an old S.H.I.E.L.D. file about him.
The Russian authorities must *know* we're here.
Yeah, but look on the *bright* side. If they sent this bucket o' bolts...
...they can't think we're much of a *threat*.
Будет больно!
What? Truth hurts, pal.
Then again, so does violence.

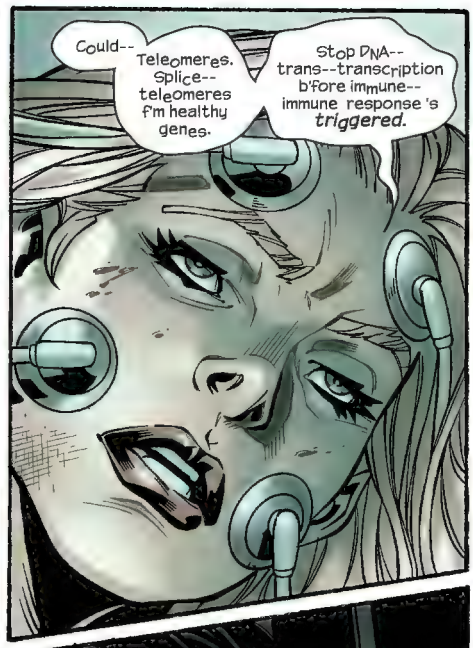
Ow! Jeez!
TSHRAKKKK
Плохо!
We've got to take this guy down, Ben.
We can't afford to get arrested here. There'll be all kinds of--
Очень плохо!
AAAHRR!
SPLITCHHH
TUNNK

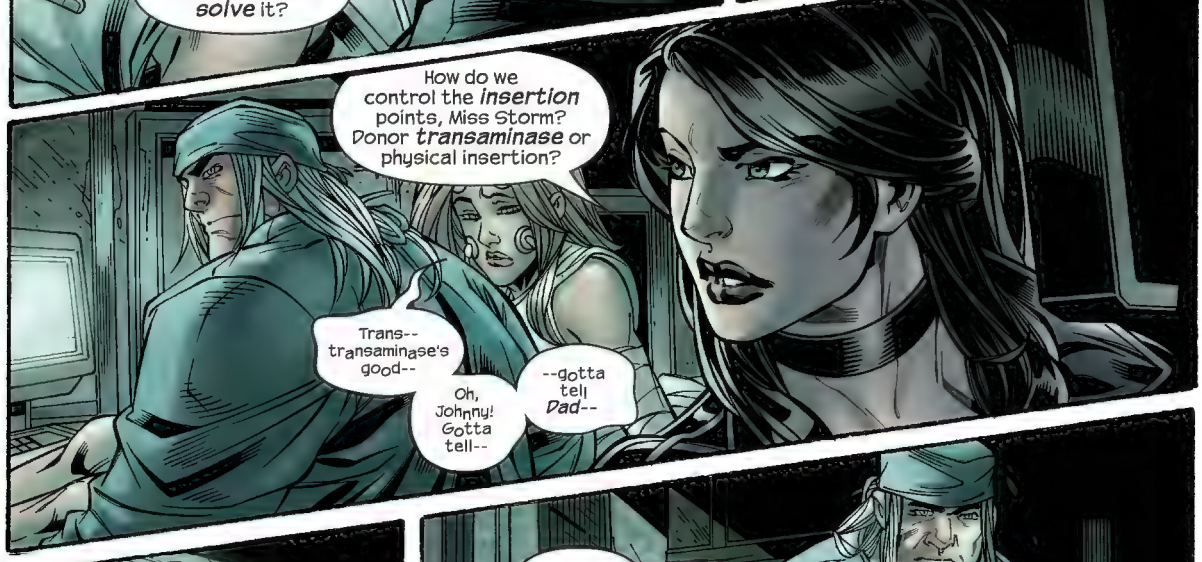
Aw, man!
Tell me this isn't some kind of a--
CHUNGGGH
All right.
This has gone far enough.
TEK
Где у тебя болит?
Идти сюда.

CHOWWWWW
CLUMP
Что случилось! Что случилось!
What'd you do to him?
Не надо. Пожалуйста, не надо!
Od desīti k peti!
Schlagen mich nicht! Ich weiss wohin sie das Mädchen genommen haben!
Shaped EM pulse. The same weapon Rhona Burchill used on our 'copter that time.
He's nineteen-eighties tech. I was gambling he wouldn't be shielded.
Oh.
Oh? Oh what? What did he say?
Well, my German's a little--
Reed, what did he say?
"Stop hitting me."
"I know where they took the girl."

Wh'm I?
Wuz--whaz happen--
--t'me?
You were in an accident, Miss Storm.
Az'dent?
In Siberia. Your plane went down in a blizzard. You barely survived, and your brother--tragically--was killed.
J--Johnny? No. No, no!
Z'not--can't--no!
Please don't despair. There's still a chance to save him, if we act quickly.
The N-Zone dismantles and rebuilds living tissue--as it did yours.
In theory--by sending two bodies together through the N-Zone--one could superimpose them onto each other. Your brother's corpse onto vat-cultured human tissue.
The anonymous flesh would become Johnny--rewritten with his genetic template--
--and he would live again.

No. Iss--not--can't--work.
Why not?
Rejesshion. Host--body will reject--
Yes, rejection has been the main problem. How do we solve it?


Could--
Teleomeres. Splice--teleomeres f'm healthy genes.
Stop DNA--trans--transcription b'fore immune--immune response 's triggered.


How do we control the insertion points, Miss Storm? Donor transaminase or physical insertion?
Trans--transaminase's good--
Oh, Johnny! Gotta tell--
--gotta tell Dad--

Johnny will be fine, Susan.
You'll see.

And this will be over before you know it.

THUNK THUNK
VSHHHHHH
You are-- Angliski? English?
Americans.
What are you doing in Siberia?
We're looking for the girl from the plane. Susan Storm. And you were sent here to look for her, too?
Nyet! I was looking for stolen technology. Crimson Dynamo and super-soldier components.
My old-- handlers?-- in State Security-- activated me to find them. Trail leads here.
The plane--
Da. Toh pravo! That is how the plane was shot down.
But girl was reason for all this. They steal her living. Alive.
Satellite footage show this clear. They take her to Tropka.
To science station. I show you?
Yeah.
You show us.

A thousand, thousand gene samples.
A thousand days, without rest, and without result.
I thought at times that I might go mad.
I'm not a monster, Miss Storm. Far from it. Most of my work has been in clinical oncology. In cancer treatment.
My wife, Julia, and I were building on Reed Richards' research--developing medical applications for N-Zone technology.
But then Julia was killed. Run down by a car on a Moscow street. And after that the work meant nothing. I couldn't--can't--do this without her.
I want to help mankind, but only if mankind includes Julia.
So this--it seems cruel, but it isn't. Not really. You won't die. You'll just--become her.
Her body and yours will be superimposed, on a cellular level. You'll be rewritten, as you were the first time you entered the N-Zone.
Only this time there will be--instructions.
Perhaps my wife will still retain your powers. If so, you may be sure she'll use them for humanitarian ends.
My lovely Julia is incapable of selfishness.

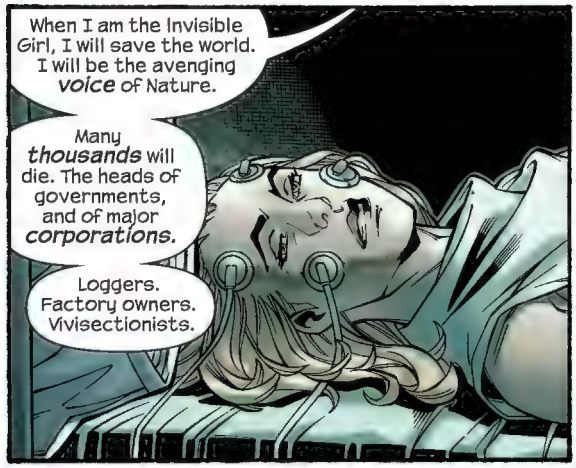
Doctor, I need to set the phase parameters. What synch lag should I use?
Three seconds, Rutskaya, diminishing at one over eight.
Julia is the template, of course, and will be the first to be reflected through the N-Zone portal.
And the sequence is preset from the Obhrutsky console?
Of course.
Using master file Kragoff-1A?
Yes. Haven't I told you all this?
Thank you, Doctor Kragoff.
It has been, as I said, a privilege working with you.
Guuuh!
But I think it's time I struck out on my own.

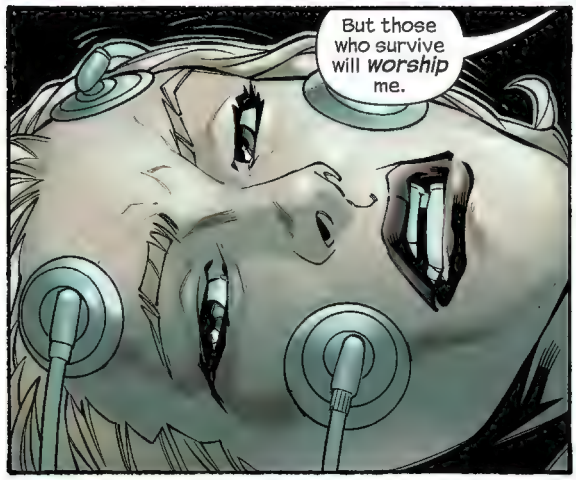
A Muscovite maiden her lone vigil keeps, 'Neath the light of the cold northern star...
...And the name that she murmurs in vain as she weeps, is Ivan Skavinsky Skavarrrrrrrrr.
He's-- not sane, is he?
He's almost a passenger. The suit tech controls twenty-two separate weapons systems.
His freedom of choice is pretty much limited to what to aim at.
And what to sing.
Oh yeah.
Twenty-three weapons systems.
Doctor Kragoff?
He is busy with the experiment, Metz. Speak to me.
We have incoming, Doctor Rutskaya. A small aircraft of some kind-- and a Crimson Dynamo.

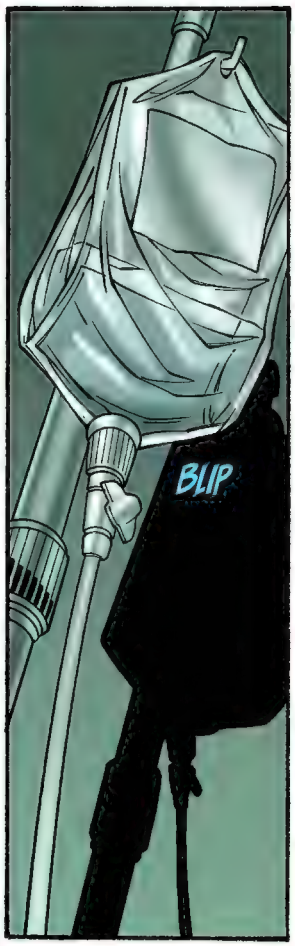
You've been training a squad with the *Mark Two* combat suits?
Yes, Doctor. But given the *power* levels, the collateral damage--
--need not *concern* you. Turn the super-soldiers loose. Do it *now*.

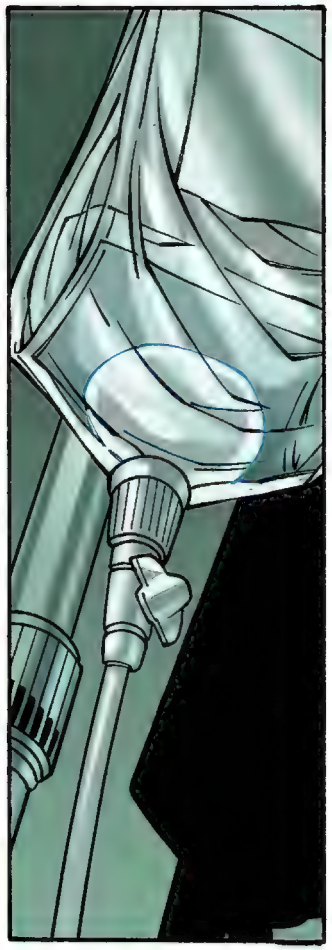
Doctor Kragoff was a fine man, Miss Storm. A *visionary*.
Using the *N-Zone* to meld two minds and bodies into one--this is an *amazing* thing.

But like *many* scientists, he was blind to the *bigger* picture.
We rape and *despoil* the world. Burn and devour the *resources* that we should nurture.
And now the world turns *against* us.
CLICK


When I am the Invisible Girl, I will save the world. I will be the avenging *voice* of Nature.
Many *thousands* will die. The heads of governments, and of major *corporations*.
Loggers. Factory owners. Vivisectionists.


But those who survive will *worship* me.

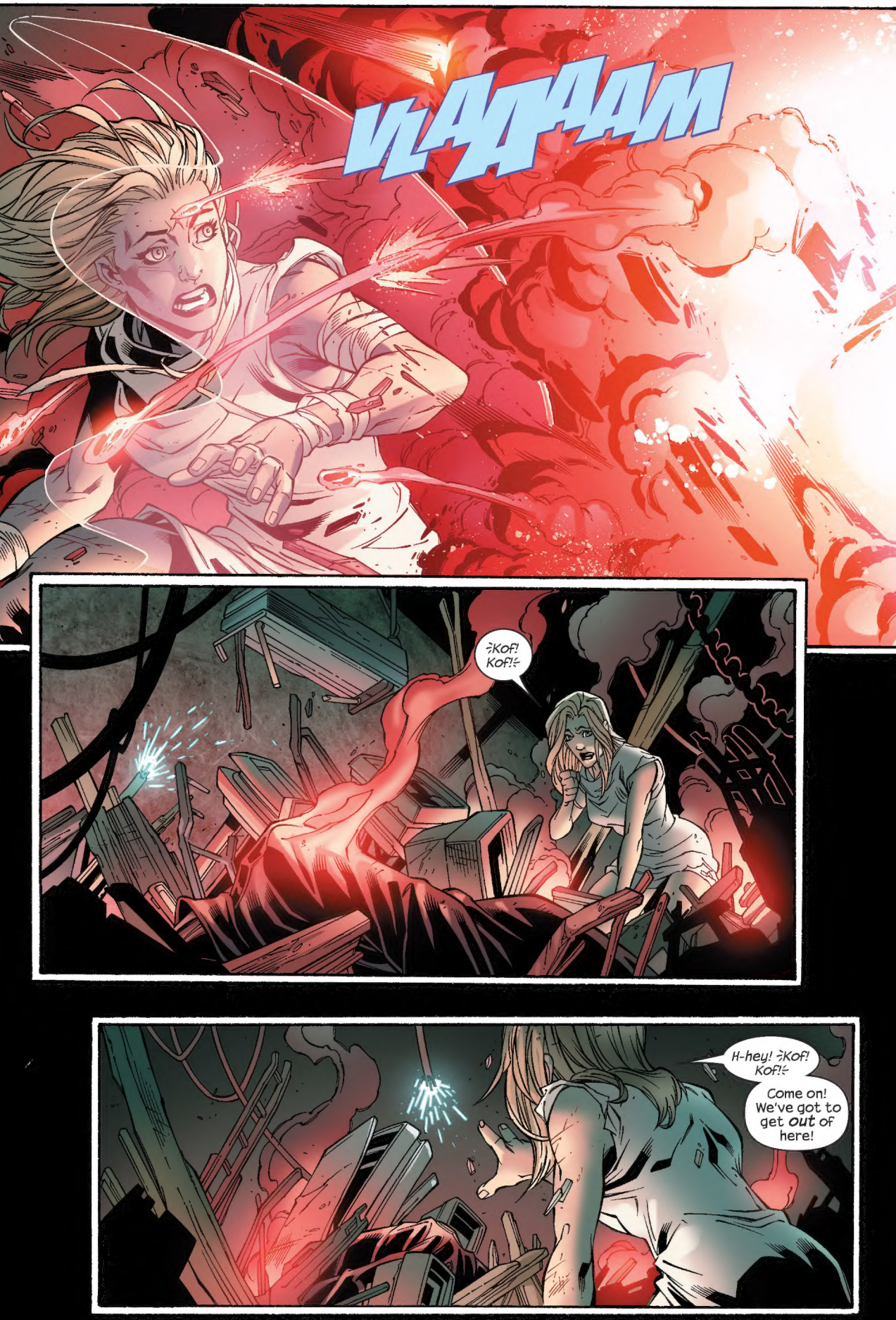

BLIP



Johnny, you and the *Dynamo* are the first wave.
We'll land the Seven-Ten-Split and come in *behind you.*
Outstanding! Watch my dust.
I wish you had a *camera* with you.
We could post this on *YouTube.*
Go in *easy.* We have no idea what's going on here.
Or what kind of *opposition* we're going to meet.

Battle! Against worthy enemies!
It make my heart to sing!
Hey, if you sing again, I'm walking.

N-ZONE CO-ORDINATES OBTAINED
PHASE MAP OBTAINED
SEQUENCE INITIATED
BIK BIK BIK
Goodbye, Miss Storm.
Or to paraphrase an American saying: *see* you--
--shortly about to *be* you.
Nnnnuh!
BZAP!
Nyet--!


VLAAAAM
÷Kof! Kof!÷
H-hey! ÷Kof! Kof!÷
Come on! We've got to get *out* of here!

I said, come on! Move!
If we stay here we're going to be--
...
R-Rutskaya?
Doctor Rutskaya? Where are you?
скажите мне если оно работало.
скажите мне если я незрим...

Tell me if it *worked,* Miss Storm.
Tell me if I'm *invisible!*